

Equal rights to paid parental leave and caring fathers- the case of Iceland

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Abstract

In 2000 the Icelandic parliament adopted unanimously a new and radical law on parental leave. The leave was extended from six months to nine; divided between the parents so that fathers were allotted three months, mothers three and the remaining three divided between the two. One reason given for this division was to try to ensure that children received care from both parents. From the results of a questionnaire answered by parents who had their first child in 1997, 2003 or 2009 it was estimated whether the intention of the law was put into practice. The results indicate that the division of care between parents, from birth until three years, has changed in the intended direction and that this is mainly due to the law. The results also showed that this is least common among parents that do not live together. However, even amongst these parents the division of care is more equal among those who had their first child in 2009 than those who had their first in 1997. Finally, the results show that there is a direct correlation between the length of leave taken by the father and his involvement in care afterwards. Overall, these results indicate that the law has had the intended effect of providing children with care from both parents.

Keywords: Parental leave; Child care; Fathers; Social environment.

Introduction

In 2000 a new law on paid parental leave was enacted in Iceland. The law provided both parents with three months non-transferable rights to paid parental leave. In addition, the parents were entitled to three months to divide as they choose. The aim of the law



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was twofold. First, to ensure that children enjoy the care of both parents and secondly, for both women and men to be able to organise family life and employment (Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave no. 95/2000).

This article investigates whether the law has enabled both parents to care for their children. Within the research project “Childcare and Labour Market Participation of Parents of Children under the age of 3”, three surveys have been conducted among the parents of first born children in 1997, 2003 and 2009. The parents were asked how they organized the care of their children from birth to the age of three in order to be able to estimate the effect of the parental leave on care including the period when the paid parental leave was over. The data shows that during the period in question the division of care between the mother and father has changed significantly as a higher proportion of children born after the law had been enacted, enjoy care from both parents.

In this paper, the legislation and development of care policies are discussed in the first section, followed by a discussion of theories on the dual earner/dual-carer model and the influences the take-up of paid parental leave has on the division of care among parents. In the second section the method of the studies will be introduced followed by a section on the results of the studies. The studies have been supported by RANNÍS (The Icelandic Research Council), the Equality Fund and the University of Iceland Research Fund. The authors thank all that have worked on the project as well as all parents, who took the time to answer the quite extensive questionnaire. Furthermore the authors thank the anonymous reviewers for relevant and important advice.

1. Fathers’ care: The case of Iceland

Until the 1980s the concept of ‘family policy’ was hardly referred to in the debates in the Icelandic parliament, *Alþingi*. This changed in the 1990s when the need for a holistic policy declaration gained greater political attention (Eydal and Gíslason, 2013). In 1994, the UN’s Year of the Family, a proposition was put forth in *Alþingi* that called for a comprehensive family policy. In 1997 *Alþingi* formally recognized the need for explicit public family policy by passing a parliamentary resolution on both the formation of family policy and measures to be implemented that would strengthen the position of the family. The principal premise was that the family is the cornerstone of Icelandic society and a source of human values that should be reinforced and protected regardless of family type. Family policy was primarily to take the following three principles into account; 1) That the welfare of the family is based upon equality between men and women and on shared responsibility for the tasks within it; 2) that the family is the setting for emotional ties; 3) and that family life provides individuals, especially children, with security and the opportunity to fully develop their qualities (*Alþingi* 1996-1997, A: 1230).

Thus, the issue of the reconciliation of work and family life gained wide attention from policymakers, labour unions and employers from the 1990s and onward (Eydal and Ólafsson, 2008). This has been reflected in legislation in various ways, most importantly in the law on paid parental leave from 2000 (discussed in the next section) but also in both family law and gender equality legislation. In 1992, the option of shared

custody after divorce was introduced, which immediately became popular with 23% of parents utilising it by 1994. This figure rose steadily up to 83% in 2010. This development was even greater amongst those who had been cohabiting with 94% choosing shared custody by 2010 (Statistics Iceland, 2012). Shared custody does not necessarily mean that the parents are equally involved in the care of their child or that the child lives with both parents. However, the development seems to be leading in that direction as two studies have shown that around a quarter of divorced parents now chose to have the children live with each parent for an equal amount of time; the most common arrangement being on a weekly basis (Arnarsson and Bjarnason, 2008; Júlíusdóttir and Arnardóttir, 2008).

1.1 Equal rights of both parents to paid parental leave

The Nordic countries, with the exception of Iceland, developed extensive schemes of paid parental leave during the immediate post-war period and according to Gauthier (1996) they emerged as leaders among the OECD countries in this regard. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, all five Nordic countries expanded their parental-leave policy emphasizing the rights of fathers to use their joint rights, while very few fathers used the opportunity to take paid parental leave (Eydal, 2008). Iceland was the last Nordic country to develop a scheme with universal entitlements. From 1975 all working mothers became entitled to 3 months paid leave but in 1980 a new law gave all parents entitlements to 3 months paid parental leave. According to the law it was possible for a mother to transfer her entitlements to the father, once she had used 30 days. In 1987, the leave period was extended gradually to 6 months (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008).

In the 1990s the Nordic countries sought ways to change the policies in order to encourage fathers to make better use of their opportunities to paid parental leave. This was in line with both gender equality and family policies in the Nordic countries that were based on the idea of a dual earner/dual carer model where both parents participate in the labour market and participate in the care of their children (Eydal and Rostgaard, 2011). Norway was the first country that enacted independent rights to non-transferable one month paid parental leave for fathers in 1993; i.e. “use or lose” and sometimes referred to as the “daddy month”. The other Nordic countries followed this example and in 2000 Iceland, which has for the most part had been a laggard in ensuring parents’ rights to paid parental leave, enacted a significant law; the *Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave (no. 95/2000)* adopted unanimously in *Alþingi* (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008).

The stated aim of the legislation was twofold, “to ensure that children enjoy the care of both parents. The second aim of the law is to enable both women and men to co-ordinate family life and work outside the home” (*Act no. 95/2000*). In order to ensure these goals are reached, each parent was given an independent right to a maternity/paternity leave of up to three months for the birth, primary adoption or permanent fostering of a child. This right could not be assigned to others. Additionally, a joint three months could be divided as the parents themselves chose. The mother has to take a maternity leave for no less than two weeks after the birth of her child, but otherwise the

parents can use their rights during the child's first year and a half. All parents are entitled to paid parental leave regardless of whether they hold custody/or share residency with their children as long as they are in an agreement with the other parent. Furthermore, the parents can choose how they use their entitlements; e.g. they can take part-time leave and they can take leave simultaneously if they wish. The law came into force in 2001, but the paternal rights were gradually implemented; i.e. fathers had the right to a one-month paternity leave in 2001, two months in 2002 and in 2003 they gained the full entitlement of three months

The payments were changed from a system of low flat rate benefits at 80% salary while on leave, but minimum compensation is still paid to those parents that have not accumulated rights by participation in labour market. A special parental leave fund was established to monitor the system. The fund receives its income from a part of the insurance levy paid by all employers. Last, a prospective parent cannot be fired after informing the employer of her or his intentions of taking parental leave.

In 2004, changes were made to the laws, which placed a cap on the amount of money received during parental leave (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). Severe cuts had to be made in the welfare system following the financial crash that shook Icelandic society in October 2008 and the parental leave was not exempt. The ceiling on payments was lowered three times from December 2008 to December 2009, but there was no change in the basic structure of the system and the cuts were regarded as a temporary measure. Still, it is fair to assume that the cuts will have affected the usage of the system.

In December 2012, *Alþingi* revised the law on paid parental leave and corrected some of the cuts to economic compensation, while extending the leave period to 12 months. Each parent is entitled to 5 months non-transferable leave and then they can divide 2 months between them. This increase was to take place in steps and be fully implemented by 2016 (Eydal and Gíslason, 2013). The act was accepted unanimously, but in October 2013 a new government announced that the increase would be delayed due to the financial difficulties of the state.

1.1.1. Care policies after paid parental leave

One of the characteristics of the Icelandic childcare model is that parents have themselves to bridge a gap between the paid parental leave and preschool while all the other Nordic countries provide paid parental leave for a year or more and additional home care allowance schemes, mainly used by parents in Finland and Norway (Eydal and Rostgaard, 2011). No legislation of home care allowances has been enacted in Iceland but since autumn 2006, a few Icelandic municipalities have paid parents' home care allowance, in those instances when the children are not enrolled in day care institutions. Research studying the goals of such payments reveals that the municipalities regard such payments to be a temporary solution, while waiting for the state to extend the parental leave to one year (Rannsóknarstofnun í barna- og fjölskylduvernd, 2010). During the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 such schemes have been abolished in the larger municipalities. The fact that such home care allowance tends to be used only by moth-

ers serves to reinforce the gendered division of labour and has been criticised heavily in other Nordic countries (Rantalaiho, 2009; Sipilä, Repo and Rissanen, 2010; Eydal and Rostgaard, 2011). However, in the case of Iceland, the care gap between the 9 month paid parental leave and preschool around the age of 2 years is also reinforcing the gendered division of labour, since it is more usual that mothers, rather than fathers, extend their leave or work part-time in order to care for children (Eydal, 2008; Farstad, 2012; Ingólfssdóttir, 2013; Rannsóknarstofnun í barna- og fjölskylduvernd, 2010).

Research on how Icelandic parents bridge the care gap shows that they use a variety of solutions; they make use of the flexibility of the paid parental leave e.g. by taking part-time leave to extend the period that they can stay at home with the child; they use family day care, regulated and subsidised by the municipalities; relatives and friends help out; or the parents work irregular working hours and take turns staying at home (Eydal, 2008; Ingólfssdóttir, 2013). Usually Icelandic children start in preschool around the age of two even though there has been an increase in placements for children under the age of two over the last decade.

The Pre-school Act states: “The local authorities shall supervise the building and running of preschools and bear the expenses involved, each in its own local government area. They shall be obliged to take the initiative in ensuring places for children in good preschools” (no. 78/1994). Since the 1990s, the municipalities have increased preschool volume, both in regards to the number of children enrolled and the hours attended. In the 2000s the proportion of children ages two through five attending preschools in Iceland is similar to Denmark and Sweden, and thus among the highest in Europe (Eydal and Rostgaard, 2011).

1.1.2 Take up of paid parental leave

The political consensus that characterized the adoption of the law on parental leave seems to have extended to society as a whole and fathers used their new rights from the beginning. The very first year over 82% of fathers made use of their rights and their proportion has remained around 88% - 90% most years. It also soon became obvious that fathers mainly use the days that only they can use. When they had one month in 2001 they used on average 39 days. This became 68 days when they had two months and 97 when the third month was added in 2003. Ever since, the use has been around 100 days on average for all the years that we have final data for. Since parents to children born in 2009 to 2011 had 36 months to make use of their rights we will not have the final data for 2011 until 2015. The reduction showed in table 1 should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Mothers, on the other hand, on average made use of their three months and the three sharable months, averaging around 181 to 187 days. This is no surprise as similar trends have been observed in other countries with individual non-transferable rights to parental leave (Duvander and Lammi-Taskula, 2011; Moss, 2013). However, the statistics also show that there was a slow, but steady increase in the number of fathers that used some of the sharable time from 14.5% in 2001 to 20.1% in 2009 the last year for which we have final data. Again, this is in line with the development in

the other Nordic countries that have non-transferable rights for fathers (Duvander and Lammi-Taskula, 2011).

Therefore, the statistics show Icelandic fathers embracing this new opportunity and generally making use of their non-transferable leave entitlements. This certainly indicates an increased sharing of care amongst parents. However, it is naturally important to note that mothers take the lion's share of leave and it is also known that many mothers extend their leave for up to a year with a similar reduction in ratio to compensation (Eydal 2008; Jónsdóttir and Aðalsteinsson, 2008).

Table 1. Fathers' and mothers' uptake of paid parental leave in Iceland, 2001-2011*

	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011*
Mothers (n)	4054	4167	4302	4555	4010	3480
Applications from fathers as % of applications from mothers	82.4%	86.6%	88.2%	88.5%	96.6%	91.4%
Average number of days used by fathers	39	97	99	101	99	84
Average number of days used by mothers	186	183	184	181	178	179
Fathers using more than their basic rights	14.5%	16.1%	19.5%	21.2%	20.1%	14.4%
Mothers using more than their basic rights	94.2%	90.9%	89.7%	93.1%	92.9%	95.5%
Fathers using less than their basic rights	5.1%	14.2%	19.5%	16.4%	19.3%	42.4%
Mothers using less than their basic rights	0.9%	1.0%	0.1%	1.5%	1.0%	1.1%
Percentage of fathers taking all of the leave in one package	45.2%	17.9%	25.8%	25.7%	34.3%	30.0%

*The figures for 2011 are preliminary (Source: Eydal and Gíslason, 2008; Fæðingarorlofssjóður, 2010, Fæðingarorlofs-
sjóður, n.d.)

There have been some studies on which fathers do not make full use of their right. They have led to similar conclusions, namely that financially better off fathers are more likely to use their right than others and they use more days (Eydal, 2008; Gíslason, 2007). This is in line with results from other Nordic countries (Sundström and Duvander, 2002; Duvander and Lammi-Taskula, 2011). However, the group of fathers most likely not to use any leave or very few days are those not living with the mother (Eydal, 2008). This is a sadly neglected area of study in Iceland as in many other countries (e.g. Kiernan, 2005; 2006; O'Brian, Brandth and Kvande, 2007). A qualitative study in Iceland in 2008 showed that parents that do not know each other well face serious obstacles when forming a parental relationship and learning to trust each other (Eydal and Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

1.2 Does take up of fathers' leave influence the division of care among parents?

As pointed out above, one of the two main objectives of the 2000 Act on paid parental leave was to ensure children receive care from both parents. As the section above shows clearly, Icelandic fathers have used their non-transferable rights and they are using the highest proportion of total number of days compared to fathers in the other Nordic countries which is in line with the fact that they have the longest non-transferable rights. The question is, does this take-up influence the division of care between the parents? And do fathers that take paid parental leave participate more in the care of their children after the leave compared to fathers who do not?

It is somewhat difficult to isolate the effect of paid parental leave take-up, since it is likely that those fathers that want to prioritize family and spend time caring for their children are more likely to take longer parental leave. O'Brian, Brandth and Kvande (2007, 382) point out that the act of taking leave is, "embedded in a complex web of parenting styles, parental work practices, infant behaviour and wider socio-economic factors...". Thus, it is important to investigate the current literature regarding the relationship between fathers' take-up of paid parental leave and their participation in care.

Non-transferable leave for fathers was enacted in Norway in 1993 and Sweden in 1995 and several studies have been conducted on the effect of men's parental leave on the division of care between these parents. A Swedish study (Duvander and Jans, 2009) viewed an association between father's take-up of parental leave and contact with their children later in life. The results indicated that the longer the leave taken by fathers, the fewer hours they worked when the child grew older; providing them with more time to spend with their children. Father's parental leave was associated also with more contact between separated fathers and their children. Similarly, Haas and Hwang (2008) found that an early close connection between fathers and children continues throughout childhood. Their study of Swedish fathers showed that it is the length of leave that matters. The number of days of leave taken had a positive impact on the time the father spent with the child and on specific childcare tasks such as preparing food and playing with the child. Fathers who took longer leaves were also the ones most likely to report satisfaction with the amount of contact they had with their children.

A Norwegian study on the long-term effects of paternity leave used father's income development in the five years following the introduction of a paternity quota as an indicator of their involvement in childcare (Rege & Solli, 2010). Using a dataset providing statistical information for every Norwegian from the year 1992 to 2002, the authors found that the introduction of four weeks paternity leave in 1993 decreased Norwegian father's future earnings by 2.1%, explained by their increased participation in unpaid care. To further investigate this relationship between the father's quota and their involvement in childcare, Rege and Solli (2010) used diaries from the Norwegian Time Use Surveys and found that fathers spent significantly more time with their children after the father's quota came into effect in 1993. Kitterød (2013) also used diaries providing information on the time spent on housework and childcare to examine the impact the Norwegian parental leave reform had in 1993. The results show that after the introduc-

tion of the father's quota, fathers spent less time working outside the home and more time on household chores and caring for their children.

The issue of the association between paternity leave and childcare involvement has also been addressed outside the Nordic countries. Tanaka and Waldfogel (2007) used data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study covering a large birth cohort of children aged 8 to 12 months. Their results showed that fathers who take parental leave become more involved with caring for their children. They were more likely to change nappies, more likely to feed the child and to get up at night when the child was age 8-12 months than those fathers who did not take a leave.

Similar results have been obtained for fathers in the United States. Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (2007) used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study- Birth Cohort, a panel study of over 10,000 children born in 2001, in order to investigate the involvement of fathers in care. From that sample they examined 7,241 fathers who were working during the period in question and living with children in two-parent families. They concluded that those fathers who took at least two weeks off from work were more involved in their children's care at nine months old than fathers who took less time off. The positive relationship between leave-taking and care was maintained when controlled for factors such as paternal pre-birth commitment.

The findings discussed above are important, as research has begun to document the impact that fathers have on their children. According to Lamb (2004), three factors emphasise the importance of the father being present in the child's life. First, when parents do not act according to the stereotypical male and female roles, the children are less likely to have gender-stereotyped attitudes. Secondly, these children may benefit from having two highly involved parents instead of one, as the mother and father are two distinct individuals who behave in different ways the child is ensured a diversity of stimulation that fosters its cognitive development. The third issue has to do with the family environment. When parents share the responsibility of childcare, both the mother and father are able to take on roles they find rewarding and fulfilling. The father will be able to satisfy his desire to bond with his child, while the mother is allowed to pursue her career goals. This may result in less conflict between the parents, which then benefits the child.

A recent survey of research-based knowledge in the field led to the conclusion that engaging the father early on leads to continued involvement. The authors of the survey also pointed out that fathers' early involvement has a positive effect on children's school performance and their social, behavioural and psychological wellbeing (Sarkadi et al., 2008). Similarly, a relatively large number of international studies have shown that a father's absence has a negative social and emotional impact on a child (Cabrera et al., 2000).

2. Method

Childcare and Labour Market Participation of Parents of Children under the age of 3 is a research project carried out in order to assess the effect of the Act on Maternity/Pa-

ternity and Parental Leave (no. 95/2000). The project compares how parents of young children balanced labour participation and the care of their children before and after the legislation took effect. The data comes from three questionnaire surveys: The first was carried out in 2001 among parents of children born in 1997, three years prior to the law. The second was conducted in 2007-2008, among parents of children born in 2003. These parents were the first ones to enjoy full rights to 9 months paid parental leave (3+3+3). Finally, data was collected in 2013 among parents of children born in 2009. The timing of the latest survey was twofold; first, to get a picture of how things had developed during the first decade after the law came fully into force and second, to get insights into how parents of young children experienced the effects of the economic crisis in regards to take-up of paid leave and childcare.

The surveys at issue are population based. Thus, the parents of all first born children born in 1997, 2003 and 2009 in Iceland received the questionnaire. The first born had to be the mother's first born. The questionnaire was sent to the home address of the mother, drawn from the national registry, and it was left to the parents to decide which of them completed the survey. In those cases where the child did not live with the mother, the questionnaire was sent to the home address of the father. It should be noted that the survey was most often completed by the mothers (in 2013 the mother answered the survey in 75% of cases, in 20% of cases the mother and father completed the survey together and in 5% of cases it was answered by the father). Parents who answered the questionnaire together were more likely to state that care was equally divided between parents than those who reported that the mother answered the questionnaire on her own. It could be that parents who divide care equally are likely to join forces when dealing with matters concerning the child, such as answering a questionnaire on caretaking. Another explanation for this difference is that mothers might underestimate the role of fathers in caring for their children. Seward, Yeatts and Zottarelli (2002) asked both parents to answer their survey and their results showed that the fathers felt they contribute more than the mothers said.

The population in 2001 consisted of the parents of 1551 children. Out of these, 890 completed and returned the questionnaire. The resulting response rate was therefore just under 57%. The population for the 2007-2008 survey was similar in size, 1572 questionnaires were sent out, of which 874 were completed and returned, making the response rate 56% for that year. With the rising number of Icelanders having access to the Internet, the 2007-2008 participants were given the opportunity to choose between a paper and online survey; chosen by 39%. The mixed data collecting method was applied in order to achieve the same response rate as in 2001. In 2013, the paper version was abandoned. Instead, parents received an invitation letter, presenting a web address to answer the survey online. That year 1929 invitation letters were sent out and 1218 of recipients completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 63% (see table 2). The response rates are quite acceptable considering the extensiveness of the questionnaire and the fact that the surveys were self-administered.¹

Table 2. Data collection and response rate

Round	2001	2007-2008	2013
Data collection method	Mail survey	Mail and web survey	Web survey
Characteristics of the population	Parents of children born in 1997 who were their mother's firstborn	Parents of children born in 2003 who were their mother's firstborn	Parents of children born in 2009 who were their mother's firstborn
Size of population	1551	1572	1929
Number of respondents	890	874	1218
Response rate	57%	56%	63%

The questionnaire used in 2001 and 2007 consisted of 48 questions. The questionnaire's main focus was on how parents organized employment the year before the birth of the child and during the child's first three years; who cared for the child until it reached the age of three and how the parents divided care among themselves. There were also questions considering work conditions for both parents, e.g. flexibility and support available to parents and changes in circumstances following childbirth. Finally, there were conventional background questions such as parent's age, education, income, and family circumstances. The same questionnaire was used in 2013, with additional questions on how the recession affected parent's employment and the length of parental leave and how well parents managed to make ends meet during the child's first year. The questions therefore required the parents to remember what their situation was like three or four years earlier. This raises a concern on the accuracy of responses. However, the birth of one's first child is an important event in people's life and it should therefore require less effort to reflect upon the situation surrounding the birth than upon circumstances or activities that are more common.

3. Results – How do fathers and mothers care for their firstborn?

Respondents were asked how care was divided between parents at night and during the day for each month from the time the child was born and until it was three years old. In the questionnaire the wording of the question was: How was the child's care at home divided between the parents the first 36 months during day and at night? The parents were asked this for each month during the first three years in their child's life. There were five answer options: 1) Mother cared completely for the child, 2) Mother cared mostly for the child, 3) Care was equally divided between parents, 4) Father cared mostly for the child, and 5) Father cared completely for the child. In figures 1-9 below, the answer options cared mostly and cared completely are combined. Thus, the data provides a picture of how the division of care changes from month to month, from the time the children

are born until the age of three. Furthermore, the data presents an image of how the division of care between Icelandic parents has changed over the past years, as it allows comparison between three groups of parents; parents who had their first child in 1997, 2003 and 2009.

3.1 Day-time care from birth to the age of three

Figures 1 to 3 show how care was divided during the day between parents of firstborns in 1997, 2003 and 2009. Figure 1 shows that for children born in 1997 daytime care during the first month was in the hands of the mother in 89% of cases ($n=879$) and care was equally divided between parents in little over 10% of cases. Equal division of care fell after the child's first month and during the first six months it was almost always the mother who cared for the child (94-95%). Thereafter, as the child grew older, the proportion of parents who divided care equally rose. During the first year the proportion of those who divided care evenly was 12% on average. During the second year it rose to 29% and in the child's third year it reached 34% on average. The proportion of fathers who were the primary caregivers was negligible for the whole period under study (ranging from 0.3% to 2.4%).

The division of care between parents changed considerably between the first two surveys. Figure 2 shows that children born in 2003 received more care from their fathers than those born in 1997. The mother was the primary caregiver in 66% of cases during the child's first month but it was evenly divided in 34% of cases ($n=842$). The proportion of children being cared for by both parents fell gradually after the first month a pattern similar to that in the earlier survey, but after the first six months the proportion of shared caring grew steadily towards the end of the period. In month 33 there were as many children who received care from both parents, as there were children who received care primarily from their mother. The proportion of children born in 2003 that were mainly cared for by their fathers was still quite low, but was considerably higher than in the study among parents of children born in 1997. Thus, while only between 0.5% and 1.1% of responding parents of children born in 1997 reported that the father was the primary care giver when the child was 7 to 12 months old, the proportion was between 4.3% and 8.1% in the study among parents of children born in 2003.

For the first months the division of daytime care between parents was similar for children born in 2003 and 2009. However, after the first 4 months, the involvement of care from fathers grew more rapidly for children born in 2009 than for those born in 2003. As shown in figure 3, by the time the children born in 2009 had reached 15 months, they were more likely to receive equal care from both parents than care primarily from the mother. When these children reached the age of three, 59% were cared for equally by their mother and father, while the same held true for 49% of children born in 2003 and only 36% for children born in 1997. Furthermore, 9% of 8, 9 and 10 month old children born in 2009 were cared for primarily by their fathers, which is a considerable increase from the earlier surveys. The peak in the father's solo responsibility of daytime

care during the latter half of the child's first year shows that fathers are likely to utilize their non-transferable right to parental leave after the child has become 6 months old.

Figure 1. How did parents of firstborns in 1997 divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?

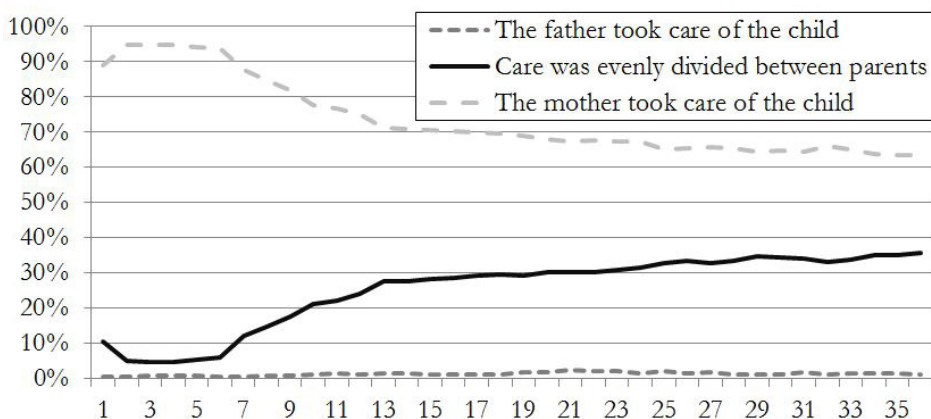


Figure 2. How did parents of firstborns in 2003 divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?

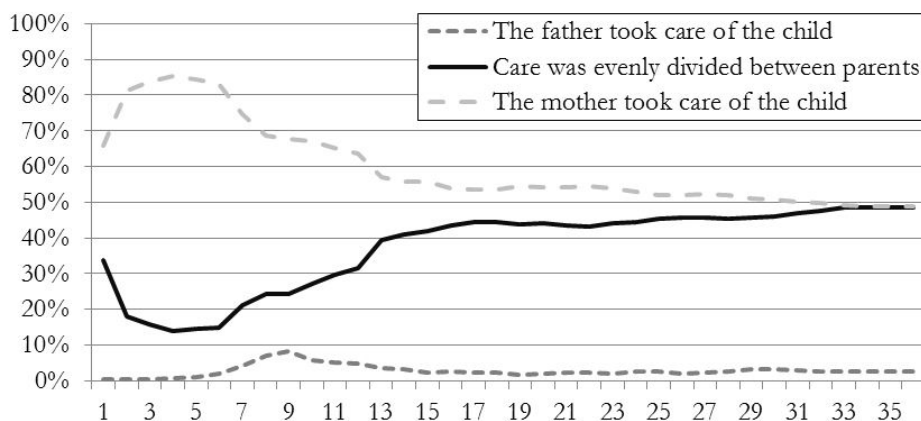
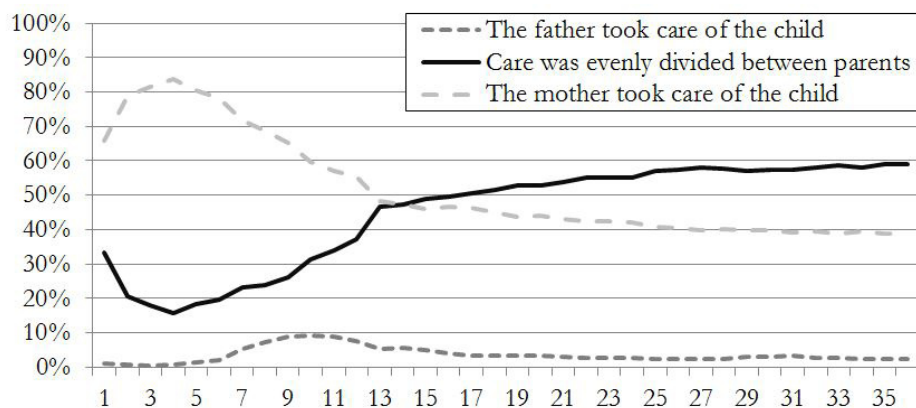


Figure 3. How did parents of firstborns in 2009 divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?



Results on care at night revealed the same pattern. Children born in 1997 received care primarily from their mother at night, although the involvement of fathers was greater during the night-time than daytime. After the law on paid parental leave was enacted, the proportion of children receiving equal care from both parents during the night rose considerably similar to the results for daytime care shown earlier. The results, however, require careful interpretation as it is quite likely that they are in part the product of a selection effect in that fathers who want to prioritize their children and who want to spend more time with their children are also the ones most likely to take parental leaves. With this caution in mind, it nevertheless seems safe to conclude that parental leave, along with other factors, increases the likelihood of fathers being involved in childcare. According to the results, this involvement continues even after the father's parental leave is over. Hence, the overall picture is clear. The law on paid parental leave provided fathers with the opportunity to take paid parental leave and Icelandic fathers have used their rights to non-transferable leave, which at the same time changed the division of care between parents. This is in line with the goal of the law, which was to ensure children care from both parents. Before the law was enacted parental care of children for the first three years was mainly in the hands of mothers and only a small group of fathers provided as much care as did the mothers. However, the children born in 2009 in most cases enjoyed equal care from both parents and only a minority was primarily cared for by their mothers during the second and third year of their lifetime, according to this study.

3.2 Day-time care in two parent families from birth to the age of three

Figures 1 to 3 above show that the share of care shouldered by fathers rose considerably after the act on parental leave was passed. It should be kept in mind however, that these figures show the distribution of responses from all parents who were asked. There was

a sizable group of fathers that did not live with their children. In figures 4 to 6 results are presented only for those parents who were married or cohabiting. The figures show a similar trend as the ones presented earlier, but the involvement of fathers is greater when the responses of single parents are ignored. Thus, while on average 45% of all responding parents of children born in 2009 stated that care was evenly divided between the mother and father during the child's first three years, the average percentage of equal care between married or cohabiting parents was 52% (n=824).

Figure 4. How did cohabiting and married parents of firstborns in 1997 divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?

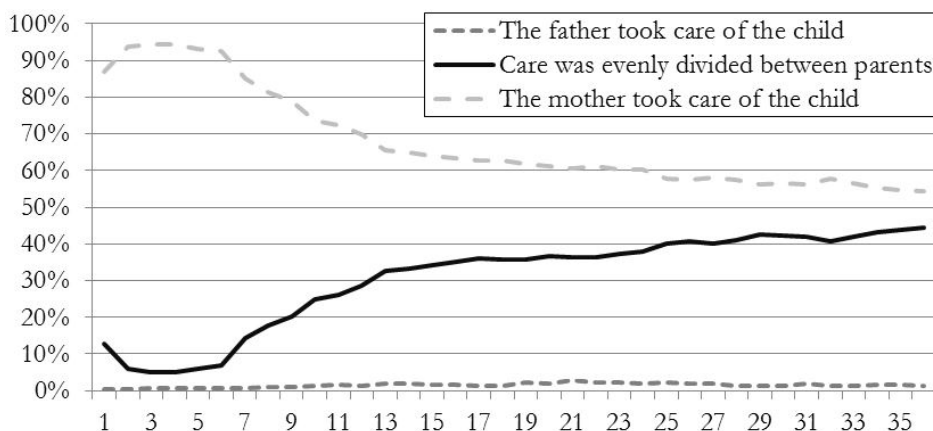


Figure 5. How did cohabiting and married parents of firstborns in 2003 divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?

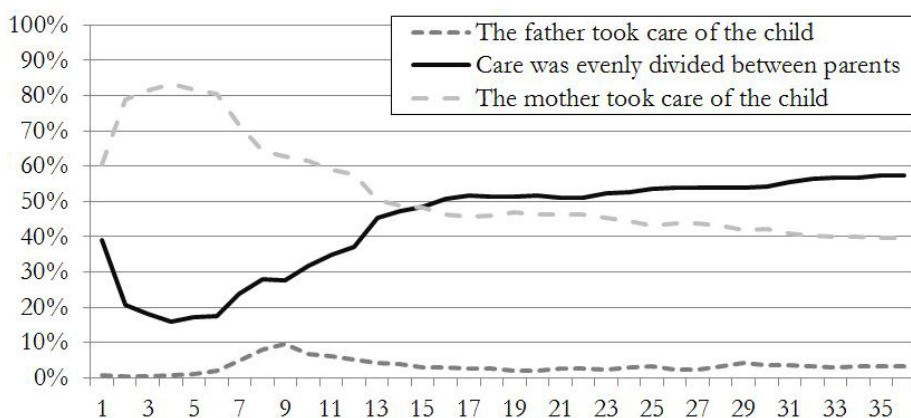
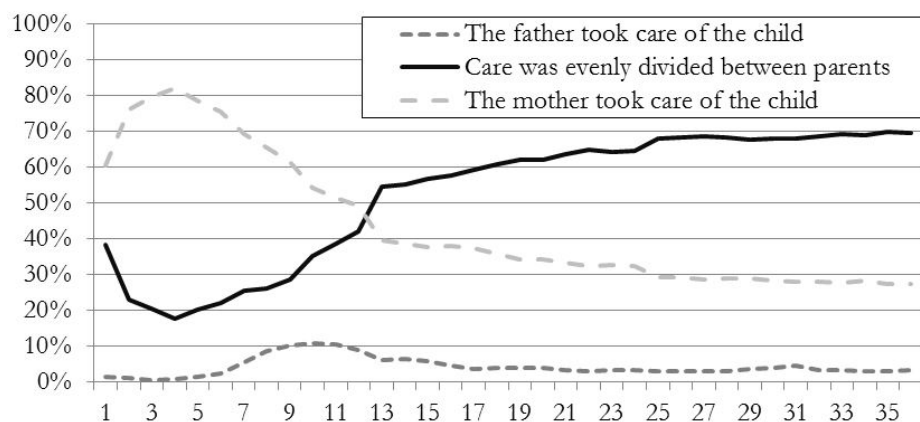


Figure 6. How did cohabiting and married parents of firstborns in 2009 divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?



Hence the data on two parent families shows that there is more equal division of care between parents that share residency with the child (married or cohabiting) compared to the total group of parents.

3.3 How do parents that do not live together divide day-time care from birth to the age of three?

Figures 7 to 9 present the distribution of responses from mothers who had never lived with the child's father. As there were only nine single fathers who answered the three surveys, their responses were ignored when presenting results from single parents. Figure 7 shows that children born in 1997 were very unlikely to receive care from their non-resident fathers during the first three years of their life. For the whole period the percentage of children receiving care primarily from their mothers ranged from 94.7% to 98.2% (n=57). The proportion of equally divided care between the mother and father was 1.9% on average during the child's first year, which rose to 4% during the second year and was at 5.3% during the child's third year.

The survey among parents of children born in 2003 revealed similar results, though the proportion of children receiving care primarily from their fathers was noticeably higher in that survey than in the one conducted four years earlier. One must however take caution when interpreting the results, as only 7.4% of mothers of children born in 2003 had never lived with the father (n=62). Thus, the peak of 4.9% of 7 and 8 month old children receiving care primarily from their father is based on only 3 responses (see figure 8).

Just under 6% of mothers of children born in 2009 had never lived with the father (n=64). When their responses to the question on who took care of the child during the day are compared to the ones from single mothers participating in the earlier surveys a

different pattern emerges. Figure 9 shows that in 91% to 95% of cases, single mothers of firstborns in 2009 were the primary care givers for the first six months, but after that the involvement of fathers becomes more evident. Thus, on the children's first birthday 81% were cared for primarily by their mothers while 16% received equal care from both parents during the day. Furthermore, the proportion of fathers, who were the primary care givers, rose after the first six months in the children's lives, ranging from 3.1% to 4.7% from month 7 to month 12. Again however, one must bear in mind that these percentages are based on very few responses.

Figure 7. How did parents of firstborns in 1997, that did not live together, divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?

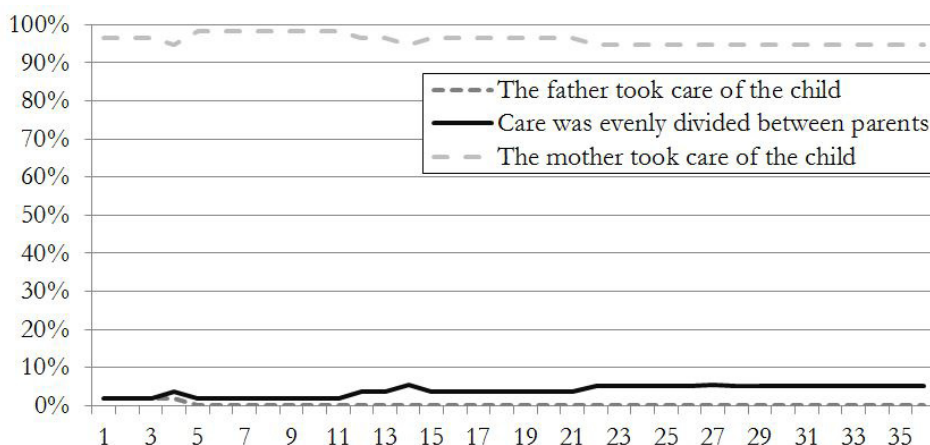


Figure 8. How did parents of firstborns in 2003, that did not live together, divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?

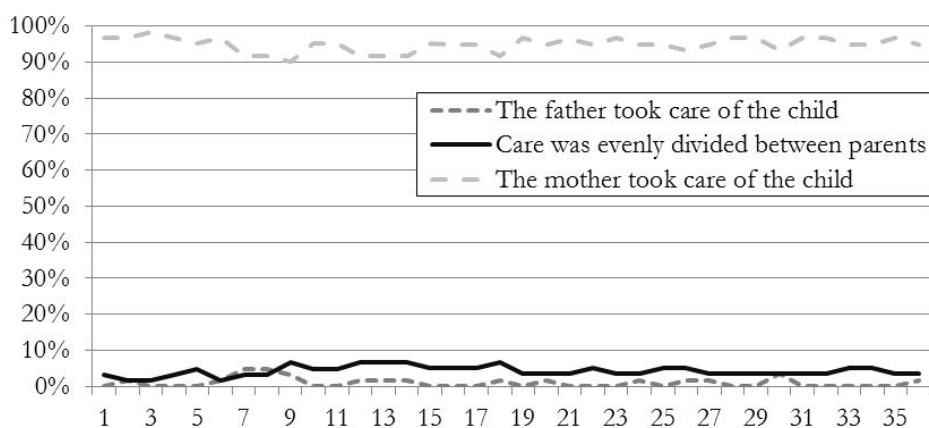
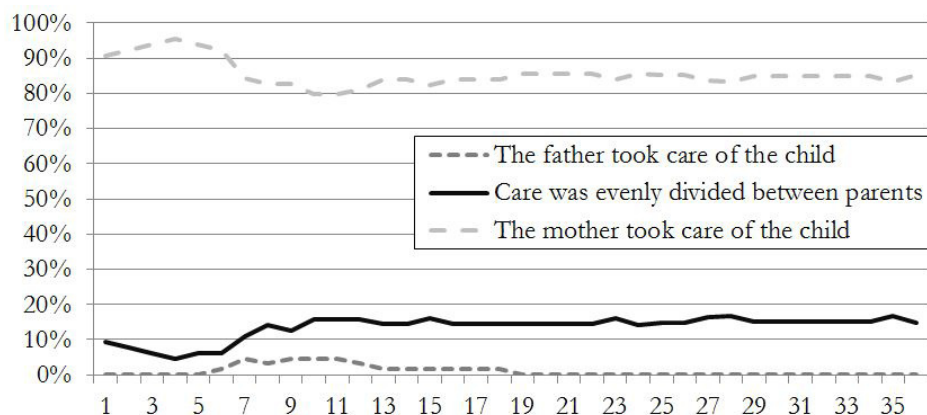


Figure 9. How did parents of firstborns in 2009, that did not live together, divide care during the day from birth till the age of three?



Thus, it is clear that the policies enacted with the law on paid parental leave in 2000 have encouraged parents to share the responsibility of caring for their children more equally. This holds true for both two parent and lone parent families. The law ensures fathers' a non-transferable right to parental leave regardless of their marital status. Therefore, the length of paid parental leave is the same for single mothers as it is for mothers who are married or cohabiting. The increased involvement in childcare of fathers who have never lived with their children shows that at least in some cases lone parent families shorten the gap between parental leave and preschool by making use of the father's right to parental leave. However, the group of lone parents is not able to ensure their children equal care from both parents in a similar manner as two parent families. These results are in line with previous research and support the need for increased family counselling for lone parents.

3.4 Do fathers that take parental leave take more active part in care of the children?

In light of the findings discussed above; i.e. that more fathers were involved in care after the law on parental leave was passed, it was interesting to see if there was a relation between the fathers take-up of parental leave and their involvement in care during the child's first three years. The distribution of fathers who took parental leave did not change between the second survey and the latest one. While 16.8% of fathers of children born in 2003 had not taken any parental leave, the same held for 17.7% of fathers of children born in 2009. In both surveys nearly 10% of fathers had taken less than three months of leave. In the survey among parents of children born in 2003, 73.6% of fathers had used their individual rights to paternity leave to the fullest (3 months) compared to 72.4% in the survey among parents of children born in 2009.

The results show that there is a difference in the number of respondents stating that care was evenly divided between parents, depending on the length of the father's leave.

Figure 10 presents the results for parents of children born in 2003. The figure shows that the proportion of evenly distributed care between parents during the day was highest when the father utilized his right to paternal leave. The same pattern was found for parents of children born in 2009. By the time the children born in 2009 turned three years old, care was evenly divided between parents in 63% of cases when the father had been on leave for at least three months, but in 41% of cases if the father took no leave at all (see figure 11).

Figure 10. Proportion of parents of firstborns in 2003 who divided care evenly during daytime from birth till the age of three, separated by the length of father's parental leave

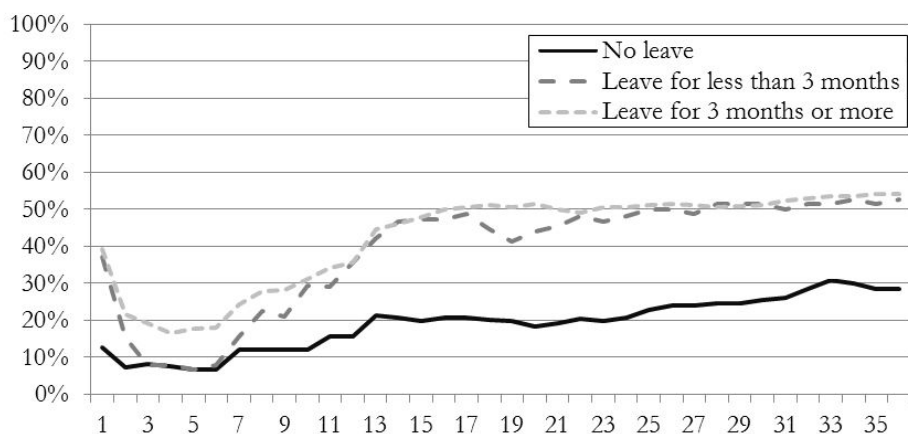
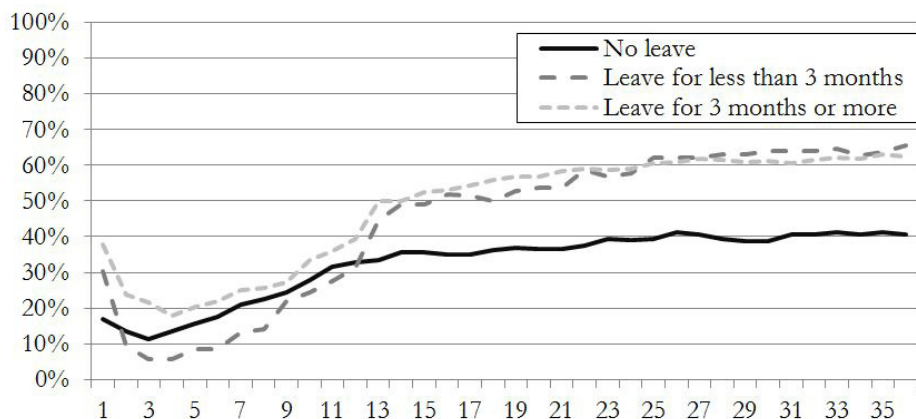


Figure 11. Proportion of parents of firstborns in 2009 who divided care evenly during daytime from birth till the age of three, separated by the length of father's parental leave



The statistical patterns discussed above are quite clear. Fathers who make use of their right to paid parental leave are the ones most likely to be equally involved in caring for their children as the mothers.

Conclusion

The law on parental leave in Iceland in 2000 was a bold move. It involved radical changes, extension of the leave period, highly increased economic compensation and not least an individualisation of rights which left Icelandic fathers with the longest non-transferable period of parental leave in the world. The social atmosphere was positive, no political party opposed the changes, the social partners accepted the changes and they were in line with long standing governmental commitments to strengthening the situation of Icelandic families and to increase gender equality. The law gained international attention since Iceland was the first country to provide fathers and mothers with equal rights to three months non-transferable rights with such high compensation.

Still, the extent to which fathers embraced the new social role probably surprised many, politicians as well as others. In international comparison, Icelandic fathers took the highest proportion of the total number of days in paid parental leave but then they also had the longest non-transferable period. Thus, the statistics certainly indicated successful attainment of one of the main goals of the law; to ensure that children receive care from both parents.

The study presented here supports the results of the official statistics on the use of parental leave by fathers. The participation of fathers in daily care for their children has steadily grown from the introduction of the non-transferable leave for fathers. This holds true for both two and lone parent families, although the mothers are still the main care providers. It is also interesting to see that the number of fathers has grown who are the main caregivers for a given period, particularly in the 7th to 10th month of the child's life. This is probably the moment when mothers return to the labour market at the end of their 6 month leave. It is highly likely that the increased participation of fathers is a result of the law on paid parental leave which provides fathers with the right to three months non-transferable leave. There have been other factors that have contributed to this development, most importantly the increase in both volumes and hours of pre-school for younger children that have enhanced mother's labour market participation, but the shift that takes place between 2000 and 2007 in father's participation in care of their first-borns shows clearly the effect of the law from 2000. A further support for the law's effect on caregiving comes from the findings on the relationship between father's take-up of parental leave and their involvement in care. Fathers who make use of their right to paid parental leave are the ones most likely to be involved equally in the care of their children.

The financial crisis that hit Iceland in October 2008 led to several cuts in the welfare system and parental leave was no exception. The economic compensation was lowered drastically but no change was made in the basic structure of the system. Possible effects of this are not visible in the statistics so far and the study presented here does not capture any large effect. Still, cuts in the benefit amount can endanger the possibilities

of parents with incomes (more often fathers) above the ceiling to use their entitlements. Also one should note a substantial drop in fertility in Iceland from the peak in 2009.

An interesting and somewhat surprising factor that emerges in this study is the growing involvement of fathers that do not live with the mother. This development is probably a combined result of changes in family law intended to enhance participation of both parents in the care of their children and the law on paid parental leave. Other family statistics and studies have shown a steadily growing involvement of fathers in childcare after separation and divorce.

A fairly large number of studies from western countries have shown that fathers who are active participants in care when their children are young tend to carry on being active so that care (and domestic labour in general) is more evenly divided between parents. Other studies have shown that an active father has positive impacts on a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. So, at least in this case, gender equality and a child's best interests go hand in hand.

Notes

1. The Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland analyzed the non-response. That analysis revealed that participants did not deviate significantly from the population, except that in 2001 and 2007 there were higher response rates from areas outside the capital city region. This is a well-established tendency in Icelandic surveys.

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