

Parental Leave: Men and Women at Work

Caroline Thorpe is a British journalist based in London. She was deputy editor of multiple award-winning *Inside Housing* magazine until 2011, when she took a year out to pursue graduate studies in gender at the London School of Economics. She has now returned to full-time journalism, specialising in social policy and politics. In this post she discusses parental leave in the UK, arguing that statutes alone will not necessarily lead to gender-neutral approaches to care. Follow her on Twitter @mrsparanandi.

Last week I received an out of office email from a successful Swedish banker. Its contents were shocking. 'I am on paternity leave until July 2013', it read.

A man taking the next nine months off work following the birth of his child? And who knows how long he'd already spent on parenting duty before my innocently-sent email triggered his outlandish response! In London, where I live, few women I know take that long 'off' (a euphemism if ever there was one) when their child is born. Men simply don't have the option beyond a paltry two-week statutory offering.

Which brings me to another shock. Two days earlier I had met up with a friend who, expecting her first child later this month, is on maternity leave from her job as a hospital doctor. Her husband also works for a bank, in London. When it comes to paternity leave for him – here it comes – he frets that he may struggle to take two days, let alone the two weeks allowed under UK law.

The UK government wants to make it easier for parenting to be shared more equally between the genders or, in the case of same-sex couples, both partners. It plans to scrap existing maternity and paternity leave in 2015, replacing them with a new '**parental leave**', a policy much-championed by deputy prime minister Nick Clegg. While women would still be entitled to 18 weeks maternity leave, ministers propose making the remaining 34 weeks of a mother's current allowance available to both parents, who could share it as they wished. And while the level of state financial support would not change, its labeling would, 'parental pay' replacing 'maternity' and 'paternity' benefits.

This is all good stuff if you're keen on ungendering the business of bringing up children, both in terms of dismantling key structural barriers to gender equality as well as addressing the power of language to set the tone that helps construct and then reinforces those barriers in the first place. (Sweden's **1995 Parental Leave Act** contains not a single 'mother' or 'father'.)

And yet here comes the But: all this is far from a done deal. Firstly, the plans face significant opposition from the business lobby. The British Chamber of Commerce reckons the proposals will attract '**endless**' **legal challenges**, while the Institute of Directors has warned that 'putting **heavier burdens** on business in these tough times wouldn't be a sensible move' (the implication being that it's okay to let them fall on parents, especially mothers, instead). Moreover the government itself admits the new system may prove **too costly** to implement by 2015, and who knows what opposition will rear its head once the legislation begins its passage through parliament in the new year.

Even if all goes swimmingly, Mr Clegg gets his way, and parental leave becomes a legal reality, then a gender-neutral approach to parenting in the statute books won't necessarily lead to gender-neutral parenting in practice. At least not if you consider the experiences some of the women have of the current system...

Take, for instance, another friend of mine who has just returned to her job at a non-profit organisation after a year's maternity leave – although it isn't her job that she's returning to. That job has had its title changed and been given to the man who was covering her while she **was** at

home looking after her baby; the man who, by the way, my friend now reports to. It's a sneaky move on the part of her employer – by claiming her post 'redundant' they can get around the rule which says a woman's job must be kept open for her during maternity leave. Even more insidiously, the organisation's (female) chief executive delivered this news with the consolation that 'you'll be off having your second in a year or two anyway'.

Asking around, my friend has discovered she is not the only woman to have suffered this fate – indeed, a swift perusal of internet forums **reveals just that**. Rather than fight it, she has decided to look for another job. Putting aside this injustice, her story reveals the deeply gendered assumptions and beliefs that persist when it comes to parenting. If a mother, supposedly protected by the law, receives this kind of treatment, what hope will a father have of securing any forthcoming 'parental' rights?

Researchers have already questioned the impact parental leave can have on altering notions of masculinity and so too gender equality. In Norway, for example, one **study** found dads who took parental leave putting their offspring into childcare while they went off hunting or renovated the house. Meanwhile, UK tax data show that men are three times **less likely** to take their current 'parental' leave entitlement than women.

The optimist in me hopes that come 2015 fathers will at least feel able to take more than the two days my friend's banking husband reckons he can get away with. The pessimist predicts he'll be corralled by the cultural forces which led to another friend's partner laughing at the idea of taking his share of parental leave. (Unless, of course, it meant hiring a nanny allowing him to he play golf all day). Even Swedish men **take just a fifth** of the leave allocated to them and their co-parent, leaving women and their ambitions to suffer the consequences.

Finally, even if the laws are in place and society is willing to embrace them, change will elude us if people remain unaware of their new-won rights – a problem, as I discovered in my third shock of the week, which exists in the current system. Did you know, for example, that UK law entitles any parent to **13 weeks off**, unpaid, at any time before their child reaches the age of five? I didn't, and I have spent the last decade working in offices with plenty of parents who didn't either.

Ultimately though, for all its flaws, parental leave must remain the UK's goal. Structural change alone will not eliminate the forces that differentiate between parental genders and bodies. But it is a start. And with time perhaps some of the rest will follow. Some might call that idea shocking. I prefer to think of it as a potentially pleasant surprise.

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