RESEARCH ARTICLE

Work–family policies, participation, and practices: fathers and childcare in Europe

Elizabeth Fox*, Gillian Pascall, and Tracey Warren

School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK

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This paper asks about social policies for fathers’ participation in childcare in Europe, and fathers’ work–family reconciliation practices and ideals, with special reference to the UK. In some European countries, especially Sweden, reform has given fathers non-transferable rights to parental leave. Might such innovations enhance UK men’s contribution to childcare? In the UK, gender inequalities in policy are stark: parental leave systems assume through maternity leaves – mothers’ responsibility for care, while seeing fathers’ care as a question of individual choice. Our qualitative research asked how fathers managed reconciliation between work and family, and how alternative social policy strategies would fit with their practices and ideals. The paper concludes that social policies supporting men’s care – particularly parental leave dedicated to fathers – are needed to enhance gender equality and work–family reconciliation for men and for women.

Keywords: fathers; fatherhood; childcare; parental leave; gender equality


Mots-clés: les pères; la paternité; le garde d’enfants; le congé parental; l’égalité des sexes

*Corresponding author. Email: elizabeth.fox@nottingham.ac.uk

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The challenge of gender equality at home and in the workplace has entered mainstream thinking on policy and planning in Europe within the broader framework of policies to ease work–family conflict and so enable the ‘reconciliation of work and family life’ (Lewis & Campbell, 2007a, 2007b; Villagomez, Martinez, Antunana, & Gago, 2004). Work–family reconciliation policies have been developing for some time now: the 1992 EU Council Recommendation on Childcare, for example, encouraged all member states to promote initiatives relating to ‘the sharing of occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children between women and men’ (92/241/EEC), while the 1996 European Parental Leave Directive (96/34/EC) clearly promotes the principle of equality between women and men who are parents, requiring an individual, non-transferable right to at least three months’ parental leave for childcare purposes (as distinct from maternity leave) after the birth or adoption of a child until a given age of up to eight years. Yet mothers in Europe continue to undertake a double shift of labour force participation and unpaid work at home.

Although the dominant policy focus has been to support women’s entry into paid work, increasing attention is now being paid to broader work–family policies including promoting men’s participation in caring for their children. Though ‘father-friendly’ policies are not uniformly developed across the EU (Deven & Moss, 2002; Ellingsaeter & Leira, 2006; Moss & O’Brien, 2006; O’Brien, Brandth, & Kvande, 2007; Vandeweyer & Glorieux, 2008), structural change, including the intensification of the working day, precarious employment in a post-industrial economy, and women’s increasing labour force participation, have been instrumental in the framing of policies with positive incentives for involved fatherhood (Hobson & Morgan, 2002) and men’s increased participation in family tasks. At the base of these is a belief that men’s increased participation in childcare at home would encourage a more egalitarian sharing of unpaid family work, promote men’s relationships with their children, allow women and men to share the burdens and benefits of more active engagement with the labour market (Brandth, 2004), and ease work–family conflict. In a recent special issue of this journal on fathers, work, and family life, O’Brien et al. (2007) conclude that we know too little about fathers’ experiences and about the work–family strategies they adopt. In this paper, we look to begin to fill this gap in knowledge about men’s work–family strategies and their experiences of work–family conflict by examining men’s participation in childcare soon after the births of their children.

Firstly, the paper analyses father-friendly parental leave policies across Europe, and fathers’ attitudes to these. Secondly, it asks how much time fathers give to caring for their children. Thirdly, it asks what policies might shift paternal work–family practices. The paper draws on qualitative data from a research project, Innovative Social Policies for Gender Equality at Work (Fox, Pascall, & Warren, 2006), in which we asked parents of young children in England about the potential relevance to their lives of various innovative policies from European countries. Here we focus on men’s responses to father-friendly parental leaves. The paper concludes with a discussion about whether men’s increased involvement at home could enhance work–family reconciliation, while promoting gender equality in work.
Work–family policies: the policy context in Europe and ‘father-friendly’ parental leave policies

European work–family policies increasingly support the notion that men and women should be able to engage in both employment and care-giving. The creation of political and social environments in which care-giving and labour market participation are shared equally between women and men would involve significant social change. This ‘transformed society’ (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 12) would mean recognising the rights and obligations of both women and men to undertake labour market and care work, while recognising the need of children for care, especially when they are young. Such a dual-earner dual-carer model (Crompton, 2006) has the potential to ‘degender’ care, which would cease to be primarily the responsibility of women. Instead, women and men would have equitable access to paid employment and care for children.

To what extent might policy influence the ‘degendering’ of care? Public policy regimes have been shown to impinge strongly on fathers’ work–family practices (Gregory & Milner, 2008). One of the most innovative policy areas is in providing incentives for fathers to care, via father-friendly parental leaves (Haas & Hwang, 2008). Parental leave may encourage fathers to share with the mother the right to be at home with the child, or include a quota for fathers which is non-transferable. The leave for fathers thus may have an ‘encouraging’ element, or a ‘mandatory’ non-transferable element with the intention of producing normative guidelines for fathers’ behaviour (Brandth, 2004; Brandth & Kvande, 2001; O’Brien et al., 2007). There are different policy intentions in these two approaches, and differing outcomes in terms of potential impact on fathers’ work–family practices. The development of work–family policies to promote men’s care is uneven, varying widely across Europe (Anxo, Fagan, Smith, & Letablier, 2007; Gauthier, 2004). Indeed, some countries have not introduced a statutory entitlement for fathers to take leave at the time of the birth of a child, although there may be negotiated agreement with employers. Legislation relating to paternity leave has been introduced, or in some cases upgraded, relatively recently (primarily since the late 1990s) in many countries. However, there is a need to distinguish between different forms of leave for fathers, because some paternity leave provision overlaps with parental leave, available to both parents.1 In countries where paternity leave has been introduced, fathers are guaranteed the right to return to their previous jobs. Nevertheless, paternity leave and parental leave is generally a right, rather than an obligation, for fathers.

Studies of parental time and men’s attitudes to parental leave suggest that policies encouraging fathers to take up leave, combined with an element of paid and ‘mandated’ leave, have been most successful in encouraging fathers’ greater participation in care (Anxo et al., 2007). These policies include elements of transferable and non-transferable leave, including quotas for fathers. Key examples of a non-transferable quota for fathers include the ‘Daddy month’ in Sweden and Denmark, ‘Daddy days’ and a four-week paternity quota in Norway, and three months’ non-transferable Daddy leave in Iceland, which is part of a three × three model (three months for mothers, three for fathers, and three for parents to share between them), in which new parents have equal rights to leave in the first nine months. The strength of the Nordic model lies in the recognition that gender neutral policies do not lead to equal participation in paid work and family life (Bergman & Hobson, 2002),...
a recognition that was highly influential in the subsequent development of proactive policies.

Policies for fathers, such as the non-transferable leave quota, are a relatively recent development, even in Scandinavia. Sweden replaced maternity leave in 1974 with parental leave (lasting 26 weeks, with 90% wage replacement), which could in principle be taken by either parent. While this policy supported women’s employment, it was mainly mothers who took parental leave. There were no incentives for fathers to do so. One consequence was that mothers, and mothers’ employers, paid the costs of their more risky status as employees. Another was a segregated and unequal labour market (Duvander, Ferranini, & Thalberg, 2006). To counter these problems, a ‘Daddy month’ was introduced in 1995 and extended to two months in 2002. The Swedish policy currently allows 480 days of parental leave, which can be used flexibly on a full-time or part-time basis, with 80% income replacement. It offers the ‘most generous combination of time and financial support to parents’ in Europe (Anxo et al., 2007, p. 5). Parental leaves are in addition to 10 days’ paternity leave and allowance at the time of childbirth (Nyberg, 2004). The time on parental leave can be stretched, using entitlements to lower levels of benefits than the 80% of previous income. This allows parents to care for their children at home for 16 months on average, before using other forms of childcare (Duvander et al., 2006). After this, public support for childcare is extensive. Policies have succeeded in establishing fatherhood as a central element of identity for men in Sweden, although variation by class has been identified (Plantin, 2007). Though there is still a ‘gap between the ideological layering of fathering and the practices of fathers’ (Bergman & Hobson, 2002, p. 112), recent evidence suggests that fathers in the Nordic countries do have a higher overall engagement in, and positive attitude towards, childcare at home than their counterparts in other European countries (European Opinion Research Group [EORG], 2004; Smith, 2004, 2008).

**Participation in care: fathers’ attitudes to, and take up of, parental leave in Europe**

Evidence from Europe on attitudes to parental leave suggests that more than three-quarters of respondents to a 2004 survey (5688 men across the EU15 states) believe that child rearing should be carried out by both the mother and the father (Eurobarometer, 2004). However, there is evidence of significant differences in both men’s awareness of, and attitudes to, parental leave between countries. In the data, three-quarters of men who had at least one child, or whose partner was expecting a baby, were aware of their right to take parental leave (including paternity leave). Levels of awareness were very high in Sweden, where almost all of this group of men (97%) were aware of the right, and in the Netherlands (83%), contrasting with less than two-thirds (57%) of men in Ireland and Portugal. However, across the EU15, almost all (84%) of men polled said that they had not taken parental leave, nor were they thinking of doing so. Again, there was significant variation across countries: while 95% of fathers in Spain and Ireland said that they had not taken, nor were they considering taking, parental leave, only a third of fathers in Sweden gave this response. Fathers were also asked if they had taken parental leave for one of their children, or a first and only child. Again, fathers in Sweden (and Denmark) gave the most positive responses (18 and 11%, respectively).
A question remains of the extent to which fathers consider parental leave to be policies for women rather than men (Camp, 2004; Hatter, Vitter, & Williams, 2002). This provides a real challenge to work–family policies since the effect of parental leave may be to reinforce rather than weaken gender inequalities (Deven & Moss, 2002; Moss, 2004; Moss & O’Brien, 2006). In the above Eurobarometer survey, fathers were asked if they had taken, or were thinking of taking, parental leave ‘because it is not exclusively for women and both partners should participate equally’ (EORG, 2004, p. 14). The most positive responses to the right to parental leave, and to gender equality in parental leave, were given by fathers in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Finland, although the response was not overwhelmingly positive.

The importance of including men, as well as women: of ‘symmetrical opportunities and responsibilities for employment and care giving’ (Gornick & Meyers, 2003, p. 12) cannot be understated in the development of policies to ease work–family conflict. The success of policies that might promote the work–family model of dual earning and caring depends on the distribution of the financial and social costs of care-giving. In the context of policies that actively promote through both ‘encouragement’ and mandated leave for fathers on the one hand, and countries where parental leave for fathers is a relatively new development on the other, the costs of care-giving (for themselves, if not others) were recognised by fathers. Many fathers cited ‘insufficient financial compensation’ as the main reason discouraging their take up of parental leave (see also Anxo et al., 2007). Other reasons fathers gave for non-take-up included a lack of information (highest in the Mediterranean countries and the UK) or the potential effect on careers. In the sections that follow, we examine the importance of these elements in fathers’ use of leave around the time of the birth of a child, and the extent to which they may influence fathers’ decisions around leave for care-giving.

Work–family practices: fathers’ engagement in childcare

A growing number of studies are demonstrating the key importance of a country’s policy framework for fathers’ uptake of parental leave (see O’Brien et al., 2007 for a review, also Brandth, 2004; Sundström, 2002), and we have seen a growing interest in fathers’ use of mandated and non-mandated ‘family time’ (Gauthier, 2004). Analysis of European Community Household Panel (ECHP) data on parental time (Smith, 2004) found across Europe, 61% of mothers and 13% of fathers of children under 16 spent ‘substantial’ parental time (defined as 28 hours or more a week spent at home rather than in the workplace). Average parental time for parents of children under 6 was, as might be expected, greater, at 18% for fathers and 67% for mothers. There was significant variation in parental time across Europe, and similarly patterned gender differences. The Scandinavian countries in the sample were ‘clear leaders’ in terms of both the numbers of fathers spending substantial parental time, and in sharing substantial parental time with mothers. Evidence suggests that fathers are spending more time at home with children, with a more marked effect in countries that have proactive policies to engage fathers in care.

Scattered evidence from Europe suggests that linkages between work–family policies, men’s attitudes to participation, and their practices are not clear. A somewhat mixed message appears to be that middle-class fathers are likely to have less gendered notions around care, but also to be somewhat reluctant, for a variety of
reasons including impact on career, to put these into practice, beyond mandated paternity leave around the time of the birth of a child. Nevertheless it seems to be that higher earning fathers who do work shorter hours contribute more care to children (Smith & Williams, 2007). Fathers in the least economically secure positions are likely to be most constrained by the absence of remunerated job-protected leave, and O’Brien et al. (2007) thus suggest that they cannot spend as much time with their partners and small children when they become fathers. There may also be a generational effect in the take up of proactive policies to engagement in care (Sundström, 2002), and the literature on couple engagement in the labour force suggests an adaptive ‘ratchet effect’ as partners move in and out of paid work (Laurie & Gershuny, 2000): women’s increased labour force participation may lead to men’s increased participation in childcare and domestic labour. Research also suggests a complicated picture of the extent to which men are engaged, or would like to be engaged, in caring for their children.

There is clearly a need to examine issues of fathers’ work–family participation and practices in more depth, and we look to men in England in this paper to begin to explore some of these issues. In England and across the UK, fathers spend some of the longest hours of fathers in Europe in paid work, and this is linked not only with structural issues but also with the perception that career prospects may be damaged by a commitment to ‘family’ (Camp, 2004). Indeed, fathers in the UK commonly increase the hours that they spend in paid work in response to becoming fathers (Gregory & Milner, 2008), with the EU Revision of the Working Time Directive allowing a continuation of the ‘opt-out’ from the 48-hour week for workers in the UK (TUC, September 2004). There is a right to request flexible working, but no requirement on employers to agree, and it applies only to parents of children aged 6 or under (18 if the child is disabled). Research demonstrates further that many parents are not aware of their rights (Camp, 2004; Gauthier, 2004). In a study of fathers’ leave taking in the UK, a small majority (61%) of those who had a child under 12 months had taken paternity leave, with working-class men less likely to have done so than those in middle-class occupations (O’Brien & Shemilt, 2003). Yet analysis of the Millennium Cohort Survey found that fathers who took leave after the birth were more involved in childcare 8–12 months later (Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007, p. 421).

We now look to men in heterosexual couples in England to ask to what extent innovative parental leave policies might impact on fathers’ work–family practices.

Methodology
The paper draws on qualitative data from a larger project that examined whether a range of innovative social policies from Europe might be applicable to the lives of couples in England. The project examined policies intended to bring fathers into unpaid work as well as mothers into paid work, and so mothers and fathers were interviewed. We recruited a purposive sample from parents of children in primary schools in the East Midlands, England. The primary criterion for the sample was low-waged mothers in two-parent heterosexual families with child/ren aged 7 or younger. Low-waged was defined according to the adult rate of the ‘National Minimum Wage’ (NMW): if women were earning at or below the NMW adult hourly rate (£4.20 per hour in 2003) plus 0.25%. Ten couples in which women were higher
Schools in two counties were selected on the basis of their socio-demographic characteristics: experiencing a severe decline in the local economy during the 1970s and 1980s, followed by a significant growth in service sector occupations, including the growth of retail outlets which are major employers of part-time, low-wage women. Contact with the schools was made initially with the head teacher. Letters outlining the project were sent home with each child in Years 1 and 2 of the selected schools (children aged 5–6, 6–7). The letter contained a return envelope and reply form, inviting any interested parent to return contact details whereby a researcher could contact them to discuss participation. Interested parents were asked screening questions to ascertain their suitability for the study. While there are limitations to purposive sampling (Berg, 2007; Silverman, 2001) its strengths lie in identifying a sample that meets a very specific set of criteria (Arber, 1993), allowing us to investigate the experiences of our population of interest.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out, shaped by a topic guide. Interviews were conducted separately with each parent in their homes; all were tape recorded and fully transcribed. Data were managed and analysed in QSR NVivo7, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 2002). The research asked about the couples’ experiences of combining work and family. Using vignettes to demonstrate the policy to the couples and explore their views, we also asked about the relevance of innovative policies from European countries to their own lives, and more generally too. Vignettes are ‘short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond’ (Finch, 1987, p. 105). Respondents can be probed about what a third party ‘ought’ to do in a given situation, as well as what they themselves think (Finch, 1987, p. 113). The focus in this paper is on men’s reactions to the potential of father-friendly parental leaves (see Fox et al., 2006 for full methodological details).

Qualitative research of this type allows in-depth consideration of the ways in which people interpret their own social worlds; it encourages participants to provide detailed descriptions in their own words; and allows exploration of social processes and the contexts in which these processes take place (Bryman, 2008). However, it is important to note that sample limitations necessarily restrict the conclusions that we can draw. Since the main target was partnered heterosexual couples, other family types are not considered. Only dual-earners were interviewed, and the self-selecting sample was white.

**Work–family practices: fathers’ experiences of parental leaves in England**

Our respondents’ take up of existing parental leave arrangements appeared to be contingent on several factors, including the availability of support networks, the support offered by employers, and any difficulties around the time of the birth. Several fathers mentioned specific difficulties around the time of their children’s births, with mothers in four couples experiencing clinical post-natal depression. For example, one father respondent noted that the problems caused by a difficult birth for his partner, and her subsequent post-natal depression, were compounded by limited support for parental leave from the father’s (local government) employer. This father used a week of his annual leave to enable him to care for their two older children after the birth of their youngest child, boosting his one week of paid leave.
On his return to work, however, when his partner was not able to care for the older children, the couple had to rely on extended family for support.

The situation experienced by this family was not atypical in our sample. Though a recent survey of British fathers found a significant increase in the number of those changing their working hours after the birth of a child (18% working shorter hours, 37% changing start and finish times, and 27% changing their hours to suit those of their partner [Smeaton & Marsh, 2006]), several fathers here gave accounts of very limited – and time delimited – time off from work when and after their children were born. Mr B routinely worked long hours and made up most of his leave at the birth of his children by temporarily changing his hours. Consequently, he only took one full day off work (unpaid) for each of his children’s births:

At the time when both [children] were born I think I had a day off, unpaid, and the rest of the time was what I made up, so working extra hours without pay. (Mr B, manager, automotive engineering, f/t)

Other fathers used a combination of somewhat loosely defined paternity leave, or even what they defined as ‘compassionate’ leave, combined with holiday days ‘saved up’ to arrange time to be with partners and children:

Just a week or ten days, I can’t remember now, a week paternity and a week holiday something like that. (Mr C, plumber, f/t)

When Louise was born I had to go into work […] a day after they came home I had an urgent job to do. I went in for a couple of hours and did that and then I came home but I had to save a week’s holiday to have any time off. (Mr K, manager, manufacturing, f/t)

One father succeeded in having three weeks off around the time of the birth of his second child by using a combination of holiday entitlement and leave at reduced pay:

With Jade [youngest child] it was different from when I had Aaron [oldest child]. I had an [unpaid] week off then because I didn’t have any holidays left so I had one week off, but with Jade I’d saved some holidays, I had a week off paid, the second week I had at eighty percent of my wages and the third week I had as holiday, so I saved up five days holiday. I had to use five days holiday and I had to lose twenty percent of one weeks’ wages, which was a minimal amount you don’t miss it at the end of the month it’s something that you don’t really see. (Mr W, production engineer, f/t)

Nevertheless, as our respondents’ experiences illustrate, many fathers were not in a situation that allowed them to take more than a very limited leave period, and for most, time off was very limited and relatively inflexible.

Work–family participation: fathers’ attitudes towards their participation in parental leave in England

Fathers’ responses to the innovative parental leave policies were generally positive:

Actually I think that is a great idea, because a lot of fathers who simply shy away from childcare, but the idea of taking two weeks when everybody else is doing it, would make it a whole lot more attractive. So I think that’s pretty good idea. And perhaps maybe a spin-off to it perhaps a lot of Dads would see that it’s pretty rewarding to care for your children. (Mr G, retail sales, f/t)
Nevertheless, the men were cautious about the potential for their own working lives, citing the impact of their family on their work, in particular, perceiving that career prospects may be damaged by a commitment to ‘family’. Fathers expressed concerns around having time away from the workplace:

I think it would be good, as a father, you have the first month off, which I think would be great, a great help to the mother as well. But then later on in the year, probably three or four months down the line have another month off, that would be great. [But] would my job have managed without me for two months? No, it probably wouldn’t, no. (Mr K, manager, manufacturing, f/t)

I couldn’t possibly be away from work for that long, the place couldn’t keep going if I wasn’t there, there’s no way I could be away for weeks at a time. (Mr P, IT worker, f/t)

Across a range of countries, parents under economic pressure have been found to distribute parental leave in a gender-traditional way (Plantin, 2007), allowing little scope for parental leave policies to ease men’s work–family conflict. Financial constraints around parental leave were central to the negative aspects of the responses of fathers in manufacturing jobs here:

For 90% of this population it is, [a financial decision] yes, most people have got bills to pay and if they’re struggling, they’ve got to do the work. (Mr F, manual worker, manufacturing, f/t)

Obviously then your money would go down a bit, and my hourly rate is quite a bit more than what [partner] is on. So [as] a couple we’d suffer money-wise. (Mr L, section manager, manual manufacturing, f/t)

While missing out on time in the workplace and financial constraints were important to the men, some fathers also expressed ambivalence about caring for a very young child. Mr E agreed that he would use an entitlement to parental leave, but a little later in the child’s life:

When he was new born, I mean I might have been alright with him, but I don’t know... I was there when he was born, but it’s more of a time for a mother to bond with the child. (Mr E, retail sales, f/t)

An interesting picture of work–family conflict, and reconciliation, emerged when we asked if fathers would envisage taking parental leave separately or together with their partner. Some fathers argued that sharing the entitlement would allow them more time as a family, and strengthen their relationships with their children, giving this as a reason for their preference that they take it together with the mother:

Well I just think that if you’re together it takes the strain off both of you. (Mr M, manual manufacturing, f/t)

I’ve got friends that erm...well their relationship with their wife has suffered because the wife has bonded with the child and Dad is out at work, Dad comes back and it’s almost it has developed into a us and him situation. So I think that that would be great... for both people to get involved at the start sort of thing, that would be my view on it and we are trying for another child myself and Fiona and if that was okay in this country then I would want to be off. (Mr H, technical manager, manufacturing, f/t)
Other fathers saw extended, shared parental leave as a means of both supporting their partners’ paid work in the work–family equation, and enabling their own involvement in family life:

Gone are the days when the woman stays at home and the man goes to work that’s gone, it’s never going to happen again, it very rarely happens but I think that it would be very, very beneficial for them to spend time with the baby. I’ve found it I found spending time with Debbie and the baby very beneficial, both as a family and it helped Debbie no end. I would have spent more if I’d the option I would have spent more time I would have took it. (Mr F, manual manufacturing, f/t)

It would be fantastic wouldn’t it, absolutely fantastic, yes. I mean I get two weeks paternity leave full pay anyway, as part of my salary contract, so I’m quite lucky in that sense, I would probably have two separate months, being in our scenario, where I would take the pressure of the home and away from Sarah’s work and I’d take over the two children, so take over the child we’d already got and the baby. (Mr R, retail sales manager, f/t)

It is important to recognise that the fathers were negotiating work and family around very varied employment situations. Some expressed the belief that their employer would be unwilling to allow extended parental leave. This perception was, to an extent, contingent on fathers’ occupations. Fathers with jobs at the top and bottom of the occupational hierarchy work the longest hours in Britain (Burke & Cooper, 2008; Fagan, 2001). Long hours cultures impact on men in more senior roles, while for men in manual occupations, long hours are crucial to their wage packets. For one senior manager interviewed, a long hours culture signified no acknowledgement from employers of men’s family situations:

Well the firm I work for expect you to live there! So they want you there to work five 12s [12-hour shifts], like a 60 hour week, which unfortunately I’m not able to do because we [partner and self] can’t physically manage the children here without myself [to help] but that’s what it’d come down to, employers agreeing to it [long working hours]. (Mr B, manager, automotive engineering, f/t)

For a manual worker, the lack of paid time off to meet the demands of family life was a source of both frustration and concern about potential loss of pay:

Me personally I’d like to have the understanding that if I need half an hour here or there I could take it without loss of pay, because I’ve got two young children, males we don’t seem to be, males don’t seem to be given that option in the working environment, come in an hour later, work an hour later. (Mr Y, manual manufacturing, f/t)

Since they identified employers as a potential obstacle in changing their work–family practices, most fathers said that they would use an entitlement only if it was supported by legislation. Previous research on parental leaves has demonstrated that it is possible to increase fathers’ take-up ‘if the legal rights are strong enough for fathers to be able to negotiate with “greedy” employing organizations’ (Gregory & Milner, 2008, p. 63). Strong legislative intervention was also supported by our respondents:

[Fathers are] not going to get [any] help from the government are they, because if he drops his hours the government is going to punish him for it, they’re not going to turn
Conclusions

Proactive work–family policies in Europe have clearly effected some change in fathers’ commitment to and experience of work and family reconciliation, particularly in Nordic countries. However, there is evidence from Europe that fathers may lack information about their rights to parental and paternity leave. Combined with workplace cultures and practices that discourage men’s take up of leave, this may limit the impact of work–family policies on fathers’ work–family conflict. Most commentators agree that men’s relationships with families are undergoing change, and that this is likely to continue, although not necessarily in ways that might be predicted (Whitehead, 2002). The evidence suggests that significant social change, or ‘transformations’ in the sense envisaged by Gornick and Meyers (2003), require vigorous and proactive policy making that engages with fathers, mothers, employers, and the labour market, and the development of positive models for fathering and men’s care across the European Union.

In conclusion, reconciling conflicts between work and family for men is a relatively new area of policy. It is crucial for gender equality, if mothers are not to be disadvantaged by being seen as solely responsible for reconciliation, that policies develop in Europe and more widely, to consider conflict between work and family as a problem for men as well as for women. In principle, the EU is committed to this ideal of gender equality, while in practice reconciliation policies have developed more slowly for men than for women in most European countries. In the UK, mothers’ responsibility is underlined with 52 weeks’ maternity leave entitlement, compared with two weeks’ paternity leave. In addition, government support for unregulated markets, including the opt-out from the 48-hour working week, make a difficult environment for fathers who want to take time to care for their children. European fathers are tending to spend more time with their children, closing the gap a little with mothers. Our father respondents found themselves under great pressures when their children were born, with few rights, and many demands from their work as well as their families. Fathers expressed their desire and responsibility to be involved with their children, their belief that the male breadwinner idea of the family was dead, and their need for time as well as income. Better off fathers were able to reconcile these demands more easily than less well off men, with more control over their working lives, and less pressure on their incomes. But there was a widespread desire and need expressed for more government regulation of employers, and more support for fathers as carers as well as employees. More gender-equal policies for reconciling work–family conflict (on the Swedish model) are crucial if mothers’ responsibilities are to be shared more equally with fathers.

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Note
1. A significant limitation of paternity leave across Europe is that it is leave which is almost always limited to fathers in paid work, and is rarely available to self-employed men.

Notes on contributors
Elizabeth Fox has been interested in fathers since researching ‘Lone Fatherhood: Experience and Perception, Choice and Constraint’ for her PhD thesis. She worked with Gillian Pascall and Tracey Warren on the HEESF-funded research project ‘Innovative Social Policies for Gender Equality at Work’ (2006) on which this paper draws.

Gillian Pascall is Professor of Social Policy at the University of Nottingham. Relationships between welfare states and gender have been at the centre of her research and publication, since Social Policy: A Feminist Analysis was published in 1986.

Tracey Warren is Reader in Sociology, University of Nottingham. She researches social inequalities in paid and unpaid work in Europe, in particular due to divisions of gender and class. She has examined the time and the economic implications – for individuals and their families – of diverse approaches to reconciling work and other areas of life.

References


