

Introducing use-it-or-lose-it leave for fathers would make life fairer for mothers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It is still the prevailing view in Australia that child care is a woman's responsibility. We have the baby, take maternity leave, and if we go back to work it is usually part time. When a man becomes a father, his working life goes on unchanged.

These gender roles feel entrenched, but a simple change in policy could turn them on their head: introduce a use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave scheme, like the one available to families in Norway.

In the 10 years before we had kids, my partner (who is now my husband) and I studied at university, travelled, worked full time and split the chores fairly evenly. The birth of our daughter was like a grenade landing in our gender-neutral utopia. Suddenly, our roles diverged. I was on maternity leave, breastfeeding around the clock, not sleeping much and now expected to do the housework.

Women are expected to manage their family's domestic life and it's reflected in the census data: one in five men say they do zero hours of unpaid domestic work each week, while about 12 per cent of women say they do more than 30 hours.

When I went back to work after 12 months at home with my daughter, who is now four, it was part-time. My experience is common: according to ABS data from 2013, mothers in Australia take on average 32 weeks maternity leave, and 84 per cent return to work in a part-time role. Meanwhile, 70 per cent of partners who take leave are back at work in two weeks.

It means that in Australia, female workforce participation is relatively low by global standards at 59.3 per cent. What's more, men earn more. Women make up 71.6 per cent of all part-time employees, which means they are more likely to be overlooked for promotion. And men far outnumber women in leadership roles.

I was very glad to receive paid parental leave from the government (and yes, I double dipped). Money is the last thing you want to be worrying about when you're caring for a newborn. But the current system makes the birth mother the primary carer by default. Dad doesn't get a look in.

Under the PPL, the primary carer is eligible for up to 18 weeks' pay at minimum wage, nine times more than Dad and Partner Pay, which is two weeks at minimum wage. The birth mother can transfer her more generous leave to her partner — but this rarely happens.

'People accept and deal with it'

The situation is different in Norway. A "paternal quota" allows fathers (and co-mothers) 10 weeks of non-transferrable leave after the birth or adoption of a child. An equivalent quota exists for mothers, with the rule that the first six weeks comes from the maternal quota.

In total, both parents have access to a share of 49 weeks paid at 100 per cent of their income at time of birth, or 59 weeks at 80 per cent.

Norwegians see paternity leave as a normal part of life.

I asked a uni friend who is raising his family in Norway about his experience. Ben moved to Oslo in 2007 with his Norwegian girlfriend, now wife. They have three kids aged seven, five and five months.

He loved having 10 weeks off, plus an extra month, to care for his kids and has nothing but praise for the system.

"All dads I speak with really enjoy their time," he says.

Ben's wife, a landscape architect for the government, is in the middle of 10 months' leave to care for their baby.

"Her boss doesn't bat an eyelid," he says.

But now that he owns his own business, Ben acknowledges that having employees take long periods off work can be a pain.

"But again, people accept and deal with it," he says.

A more level playing field

I ask about the housework split at their place. Ben says he does 70 per cent, his wife does 30 (she says it's 50/50). Both answers are a far cry from the heavily gendered status quo in Australia, and Ben agrees that gender roles are more even in Norway.

"Most women are back to work 12 months after having kids. Rarely do mums stay at home until kids are three or four," he says.

To help parents go back to work, every child in Norway is guaranteed a childcare spot from 12 months, the cost of which is capped (Ben says they'll pay about \$500 a month, food included).

Here in Australia, many families find that mum's part-time wage doesn't cover childcare costs.

These measures are so simple, yet so effective. It's no surprise that Norway ranks third on the WEF 2016 Gender Gap Report index (Iceland and Finland are first and second), and Australia languishes at 46th on the list.

Yes, generous parental benefits and subsidised childcare are expensive, but they result in more women working and paying tax.

And besides, Norway can afford it, thanks to the country's government-held sovereign wealth funds, made enormously rich from the profits from oil and gas production. If only we had something similar in Australia...

If we recognised fathers in the same way as Norway, it would help level the gender playing field. Men would be empowered to take on more responsibilities at home.

Workplace flexibility would stop being a women's issue if it applied equally to men.

Employers would be more open to promoting part-time workers to senior positions. Women would feel more supported and dare I say it, less stressed.

For me, four years and another daughter later, my partner and I are back to sharing duties — that is to say, we're both exhausted. I don't think he'd be too upset if I said the split is roughly 60-40, my way. We'll keep working towards 50/50.

-reprinted from ABC News

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