

'Irish fathers lose out on a precious time in their child's life' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Last September, fathers of children born in Ireland became eligible for up to two weeks' paternity leave, up from just three days previously. But figures from the first few months of the scheme show a very low uptake, despite the fact that new dads in Ireland are still entitled to much less time than fathers in other countries. Do cultural attitudes towards taking parental leave just take time to change?

In Sweden, new parents get 480 days leave on 80 per cent of their salary, with 90 days paid leave reserved for fathers. In Iceland, mothers get three months, fathers get three months, and there's another three months to be split as the couple wishes,

In Norway, dads can take up to 10 weeks, while mums can take 35 weeks on full pay or 45 weeks at 80 per cent pay. The couple can take an additional 45 weeks fully paid, or 56 weeks on 80 per cent pay.

Slovenian dads can take 90 days paternity leave, 15 of which are fully paid with the rest granted on a minimum wage.

Irish Times Abroad asked parents living in other countries about their experience of parental leave entitlements where they live. Below is a selection of their responses.

Kevin Godinho, Sweden

In 2013 I moved to Rimbo in Sweden to live with my girlfriend Anna, and in September 2015 our daughter Omie was born. While I was aware of Sweden's equal parental leave, I was still nervous about my job prospects if I disclosed our impending arrival in a job interview I had, while Anna was still pregnant. Once I mentioned it, the interviewer couldn't have been more dismissive about my worries. "This is Sweden," she said, "you have every right to take parental leave". I got the job.

Once Omie arrived I was entitled to 10 paid days off. Both parents also get 480 days to split between them as they wish, with a minimum of three months each, over the child's first eight years. This is mostly paid at 80 per cent of your salary. You can also take as many unpaid days as you like for the first year. The logistics and bureaucracy can be frustrating, but then I just think about the fact that I wouldn't even have this option in Ireland.

We were able to take joint parental leave with Omie for a time, and after a couple of months of work I took paternity leave on my own. It was difficult to start with as she had developed such a close bond with her mother, but we eventually started to develop a bond and routines of our own. I don't think we'd have the same relationship now if we didn't have that time together.

From my new perspective it seems so unfair to give Irish mothers the primary care-giving role without a choice, coupled with a possible knock-on effect on their career. Irish fathers are also losing out on a precious time in their child's life.

I'm about to start parental leave again for our son Teo who was born in November. I'm looking forward to the time I'll have with him that I wouldn't have had the chance of if he had been born in Ireland.

Mary Johnson, the Netherlands

Living in the Netherlands and now 40 weeks pregnant, my friend from home said to me a few months ago, "Gwan, make me jealous. Tell me what the maternity and paternity leave is like."

I laughed. Dutch culture is seen as open-minded and progressive around the world, but the system of maternity and paternity leave here leaves a lot to be desired.

As a woman, I am entitled to 16 weeks paid maternity leave, minimum four weeks of which I had to take before the due date. We are also entitled to 415 hours parental leave per child if you work five days (which is not necessarily common here). As a teacher, and therefore a public servant, I get paid 60 per cent for my parental leave, but this is not the case for most people. Usually it's completely unpaid.

But the real joke is paternity leave. My husband, and all fathers in the Netherlands, are entitled to five days (yes, days) of paternity leave, three of which are unpaid. This means that daddy will have to take annual leave in order to be able to spend any quality time with baby and

mammy. For a country as forward-looking as the Netherlands claims to be, I think this is horrific.

The whole system is “justified” by the government because of a unique service which is provided to parents, whether it be their first or tenth child. We’re lucky enough to have what’s called a “kraamzorg” come to the house, paid for by your insurer, for a total of 32 hours for eight days after the baby is born. She (I have never heard of a male kraamzorg) will teach both parents the basics of dealing with a new baby - bathing, nappies, clothes - as well as supporting the mammy with breastfeeding, doing your laundry, going to the shops and making sure mammy is getting the nutrients she needs at this important time. Of course, she’ll also mind the baby if mammy needs a nap.

While I wouldn’t give up the kraamzorg for the world, I’m not sure that this replaces the precious time daddy needs with his child in the days and weeks after the birth of his child, both for his sake, the mother’s, and the baby’s.

Caoimhe Giolla-Møller, Denmark

I’ve lived in Copenhagen since 2004, where I work as a teacher. I am married to a Dane, Thomas, and together we have two girls; Sif (5) and Róisín (2). I stopped working six weeks before the due date of both children and was paid my full salary for this time, and for nine months after their birth. After that, I was paid roughly half my salary by the state for the remaining three months of their first year.

My husband was given two weeks’ paid leave after the birth of both girls, and when our second was born he received three months paid leave, which he took when Róisín was nine months old. Both of us were given the time and financial support to be able to have one parent stay at home with our girls in the first year of their lives. We could have divided the paternal leave up more equally between us if we had wanted to do it that way.

Unfortunately I suffered from postnatal depression after the birth of both my girls. The help and support I received from the state through free counselling support groups, therapy, medical care and nurse visits was amazing, and helped our family through this difficult time.

Both our girls were given a place in government-run daycares which they’ve attended since the age of one. We only pay one-third of the cost of a place in these centres, as the costs are heavily subsidised by the government. The amount we need to pay is even less with the second child.

I often think about how lucky I am to have had my children in Denmark, a country with such attractive and forward thinking views on parental care.

Fionnuala Zinnecker, Germany

My husband and I live and work in Germany. All three of our sons were born here after the current “Elternzeit” (parent time) regulations came into effect. In an ideal world, the shared the parental leave that these regulations allow is a wonderful thing. But the reality can be quite different. Although all German fathers are entitled to share parental leave with their child’s mother, many don’t take up the offer. Employers are often not too pleased to have to do without an employee for up to 12 months. The take up rate by fathers on parental leave is only around 35 per cent in Germany, and that is part-paid parental leave.

My husband took three months of parental leave in total; none with the first child due to starting a new job the month the child was born, two months with the second, and one month with the third. The nature of his job and lack of resources at the international corporations he works for didn’t allow him to take more than a month. Male colleagues I know have dreaded the conversation with their bosses about taking parental leave because of the tension it can cause.

Parents working on commission-based salaries are also at a disadvantage in the German system due to the pay during parental leave being based on basic income. A friend’s husband declined taking parental leave as a result. They simply couldn’t have afforded the loss of his salary for an extended period.

Deirdre Matthews, Canada

When my hubby and I set off in search of an adventure in 2012 I never thought that five years and a baby later we would still be here in Toronto. Once we adjusted to the surprise of my pregnancy in 2015 we started to question how we would cope without family to help. They say it takes a village to raise a child and here we were, just the two of us in a big city, still partying every weekend and brunching away our hangovers... how could we become parents? On December 30th, 2015, a month earlier than planned, we had a little boy who changed our lives completely.

Maternity leave in Ontario is 12 months, which can be shared between both parents, on a maximum of 55 per cent pay. Career wise, it didn’t work for my husband to take any additional time off. When planning for the new arrival I was laughing at the thoughts of staying off work for a year: “Why on earth would I need a year off? I will be so bored!” I thought. Then I had the baby, and after we survived the first six crazy weeks and a routine began to form, I started to question how I would be able to return to work at all.

With visiting family and trips back to Ireland, the year took on a pace of its own and suddenly in October I realised my days as a stay at home mom were numbered. While waiting for day care waiting lists to clear we started looking at alternatives and then decided that it made sense for me to take an additional six months leave. Work was brilliant and gave me the time off, and although I knew it could have an impact later on in my career, I decided to take the plunge. January to June this year was the most fun I have had since our son was born. I was with him for all his firsts: words, steps, falls. I made the most of every day we had, and when I returned to work this month I felt ready, excited and grateful.

Ontario recently introduced changes to the maternity leave, giving women the option of taking 18 months instead of 12. Every woman is different and every one has individual needs and wants that might not allow this length of time away from full-time earning. But to have

this option is amazing, and to be able to split it with the father is great too. I processed forms for one of the bankers I work with and he is taking six weeks off when his wife has their second baby. If number two comes when we are here, that would definitely be needed.

Diarmuid Hayes, Madrid

I'm from Wexford and I'm living in Madrid nearly 10 years now, where I work in accounts. I'm father to two children, Alanna (12) and Christopher (4). Alanna was born in the Rotunda in Dublin, and I was given a paltry three days off, which were unpaid because I was on a temporary contract at the time. I had to go back to work, missing many vital things like her first check-up. It was totally inadequate.

When Christopher was born in Madrid I received 15 days leave. Combining this with my holidays, I was nearly a month at home. It helped a lot in those early days of sleepless nights! And I got to be there for his first check-ups in the hospital, and participate fully in his first month of life.

In the last year, paternity leave has been extended to one month, because the birth rate here is still very low, probably due to the poor economic situation.

-reprinted from The Irish Times

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