

Law firms 'do not encourage men to take parental leave' ^[1]

Author:

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EXCERPTS

The “professional ethos and culture” of law firms discourages men from taking parental leave, leading to gender inequality in the legal profession, an international study has found.

Researchers at the University of Eastern Finland and TÉLUQ University in Québec examined male lawyers’ motives behind taking or not taking paternity and parental leave in law firms based in Helsinki, Finland, and Montréal, Canada.

According to their findings, reported in the *International Journal of the Legal Profession*, the professional culture in law firms is still based on the traditional masculine image of men as providers for their families.

Researcher Marta Choroszewicz from the University of Eastern Finland explained: “In law firms, family policies and flexible working arrangements are mainly targeted at women, and this has a negative impact on women’s career development.

“If fathers took a more active role in child care, it would facilitate the emergence of a professional culture that is more family-friendly. In the process, it is also likely that this would reduce gender bias in the division of legal tasks and career paths within law firms.”

The study found that Canadian male lawyers were significantly less keen to take paternity leave than their Finnish colleagues.

The researchers believe this is partly explained by Finland’s longer paternity leave tradition; instead of taking paternity leave, Canadian male lawyers preferred taking annual holiday when their child was born.

Organisational differences between Finnish and Canadian law firms were also considered a factor. In Finland, young lawyers typically work as members of a team and face lower expectations to attract new clients than their Canadian colleagues. In Canada, the work revolves more around the individual, and even young lawyers are expected to contribute to marketing, networking and new client recruitment.

In Finland, attitudes to paternity leave also vary by generation. Partners representing the post-war generation and Generation X often did not take paternity leave when their children were small, and do not necessarily understand the need of today’s young male lawyers to participate in early child care. At many firms, paternity leave is still regarded as optional compared to maternity leave.

Ms Choroszewicz said: “It is not enough that men’s right to parental leave is guaranteed by legislation.

“We also need organisational solutions, collegial encouragement and examples set by male law firm partners.”

In Finland, the right to paternity leave was enacted in legislation in 1978 and extended in 2013 to nine weeks long.

In Canada, taking paternity leave has been possible since 2006, but only in Québec and only for half as long as allowed in Finland.

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