

Sweden: Where it's taboo for dads to skip parental leave ^[1]

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Excerpts

It's been 50 years since Sweden introduced state-funded parental leave, designed for couples to share. The pioneering policy offers some surprising lessons for other countries.

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Since 1974, when the policy became law, the number of paid parental-leave days has increased even further. Today, parents in Sweden (including LGBTQ+, adoptive and single parents) are legally entitled to a total of 480 days off work, one of the most generous state-funded packages on the planet. For the first 390 days, most parents can claim benefits equivalent to 80% of their salaries, up to a monthly salary cap of SEK47,750 (\$4,650, £3,590). After that, there is a daily statutory compensation of SEK180 (\$16, £14).

Sweden's approach offers plenty of insights for countries or workplaces that are looking to offer more gender-neutral childcare policies. Plus, there's a growing body of research highlighting the positive consequences of taking leave on parents' wellbeing. At the same time, however, equality campaigners argue that while Sweden's policies might seem utopic to feminist observers, its success in encouraging parents to share leave has stalled in recent years, and the majority of heterosexual couples still don't share their state-subsidised leave days 50/50.

The fight to normalise paternity leave

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Despite strong support at the ballot box, social norms didn't shift overnight. In 1974, when the shared parental leave policy was first introduced, just 0.5% of all leave days were taken by fathers; by the 1990s, the proportion was still in single digits. In 1995, 30 days of leave were, for the first time, reserved specifically for each parent, with the idea that having a dedicated "daddy month" would incentivise couples to share the benefit more equally. This "use-it-or-lose-it" leave was increased to 60 days in 2002 and 90 days in 2016. Each of these reforms has seen men taking on a larger share of parental leave days, reaching around 30% today.

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Fathers in Sweden take the highest proportion of state-subsidised leave in the EU, according to recent OECD data. A study published in 2023 by the Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate found that just 18% of fathers who had children born in 2017 hadn't used any of their parental leave allowance.

Moberg argues that – in professional settings at least – workplace culture has shifted. "There is now a little bit of stigma on men who don't take leave," she says. "It's so kind of ingrained now that being a good father, a modern father, is to take at least some leave."

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"There is now a little bit of stigma on men who don't take leave. It's so kind of ingrained now that being a good father, a modern father, is to take at least some leave" – Ylva Moberg

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Happier and healthier employees

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It's typical that parents who've split leave continue to share other childcare responsibilities, such as taking their kids to and from preschools, or staying at home with a sick child. This means that in many offices, there isn't a culture of working late, or a norm of parents paying for private childcare.

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Sweden's parental-leave policies have even become an increasingly popular tool for businesses seeking to attract global talent with the

lure of a better work-life balance; Swedish companies including Spotify and Volvo recently introduced comparable parental leave systems for their employees worldwide.

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In 2023, researchers at Stockholm University's Department of Public Health Sciences released a study on the benefits of extended parental leave on mental health. Following a global scientific literature review, they concluded that mothers and fathers in countries with generous leave schemes – including Sweden – had a reduced risk of depression and burnout. Separate research also suggested a drop in risky behaviours including alcohol abuse among fathers in Sweden in connection who took parental leave, and a dip in psychiatric hospitalisations amongst migrant fathers who took more leave.

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Ideals versus reality

However, academics and gender equality campaigners in Sweden are keen to stress that there are limitations to Sweden's approach, which international observers in awe of the Scandinavian country's progress often gloss over.

Moberg points out that while 30% of all available days are taken by fathers, this means the majority are still taken by mothers; while Sweden is more "gender equal" than many places, it isn't a place where childcare is shared 50/50, despite its global reputation for equality.

There is also research that suggests certain groups in Swedish society are much less likely to use their allocated leave days than others, including fathers on lower incomes and those who are unemployed, self-employed or born abroad.

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Eligibility for earnings-related leave in Sweden also depends on having a steady income before becoming a parent (although all parents are granted a base-level statutory benefit from the state), which can make it harder for groups including students, gig economy workers or people with chronic health conditions to take parental leave.

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From July, parents will be able to take up to 60 days of leave simultaneously up until a child turns 15 months old, and families will even have the option to transfer up to 90 days of parental allowance to another adult. The government argues the policy will enable relatives or close friends to help out with childcare, reflecting the complexities of what Swedes call "livspusslet" (the puzzle of life).

However, others fear it could encourage families to "contract-out" childcare, and the policy has been strongly criticised by Sweden's largest opposition party, the Social Democrats, who first instigated Sweden's gender-neutral leave system in the 1970s.

Global lessons

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First, she points to the limited parental leave uptake by Swedish fathers before the country introduced "use-it-or-lose-it" quotas. Moberg suggests that similar incentivised reforms will therefore likely be needed to drive radical change elsewhere.

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Plus, while growing numbers of fathers are now going on parental leave, the fact that Swedish women still tend to take the lion's share demonstrates the limited impact of legislation in the face of centuries-old gender norms.

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A source of pride

Putting health, economic and political debates aside, Sweden's long-running, family-friendly parental leave policies clearly remain a source of pride for parents like Roxland, and septuagenarian Sarnold.

"It's a fantastic subsidy that you get from the state," says Roxland. He concludes that it's both a practical tool that helps parents share logistical workloads, and a catalyst for supporting workplace diversity, which he hopes other countries will continue to be inspired by.

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