

# Why Dads Take Parental Leave

Fact sheet about the parental insurance systems in the Nordic countries



# The design of the parental insurance system affects men’s use of it

**Nordic dads take more parental leave than the international average. Yet the rates vary across the Nordic countries and despite many advances in gender equality, mothers continue to spend more time with their children than fathers do. This fact sheet from NIKK explains what the parental insurance system looks like in the Nordic countries and how its design affects fathers’ use of it.**

The opportunity for both mothers and fathers to combine parenthood with paid work has long been an important gender equality issue in the Nordic region. In a global perspective, the Nordic countries were pioneers in promoting development in this direction. For example, in the 1970s Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce parental leave that can be shared between the parents, enabling them to take equal amounts of time off from work to stay home with a child. In the early 1990s, Norway went a step further and reserved a certain number of weeks of parental leave for the father. These weeks – ‘daddy weeks’ – could not be transferred to the mother. Since then, all Nordic countries have in various ways tried to encourage fathers to increase their use of the parental leave system.

Statistics show that Nordic dads are becoming increasingly prone to go on parental leave. However, their rates of parental leave remain far lower than those of mothers. But why is an equal distribution of parental leave important? The fact that women take much more parental leave than men may have negative effects on their situation in the labour market. Increased parental leave rates among men would contribute to increased gender equality both in the labour market and in the home environment, and would also improve the connection between fathers and their children. An equal distribution of parental leave can also be considered a goal from the perspective of children. According to the UN Children’s Convention, every child is entitled to both parents.

### Three-part parental insurance effective in Iceland

In the year 2000, Iceland became the first country in the world to introduce a parental insurance consisting of three parts. Icelandic parents had previously been able to share six months of paid parental leave between them, but in practice only women stayed home with

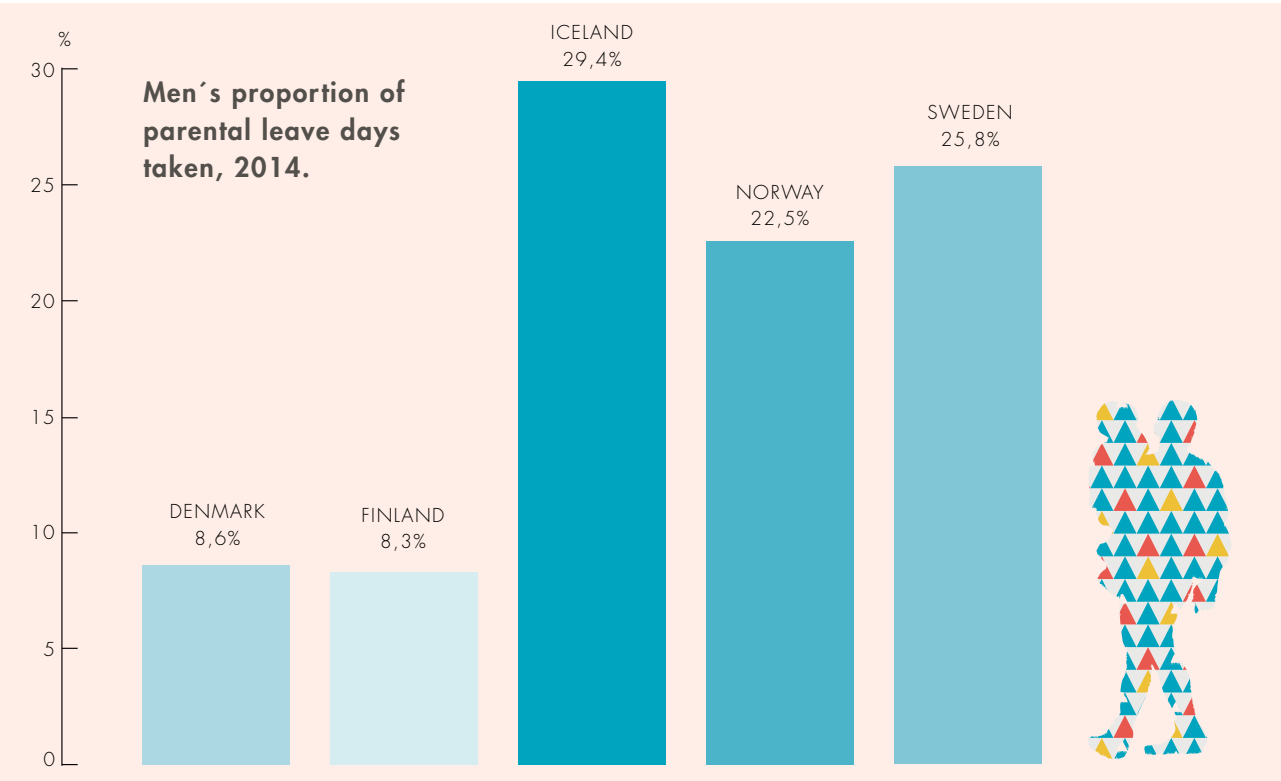
their children. The reform extended the entitlement to parental leave from six months to nine months per child, of which three months were earmarked for each parent and three months could be shared freely. The effect was dramatic. Before the reform, only 0.2–0.4 per cent of Icelandic men took parental leave in Iceland. After the reform, the rate climbed to 87 per cent. Data from 2011 show that about 90 per cent of dads took advantage of their right to three ‘daddy months’.

A quantitative study of new parents in Iceland, conducted on three occasions, shows that the reform has had gender equality effects. In the study, couples are asked about their sharing of household work, caring for children and participation in the labour market. The responses show that the distribution of work in these areas has become more gender equal following the legislative change. The respondents report that fathers who have taken their earmarked paternal leave have become more active in their parental role. The responses also point to effects of the new law in the labour market. Women are found to return to paid work and their pre-leave number of weekly working hours faster than prior to the reform.

### Norway reducing and Sweden increasing the number of ‘daddy days’

Norway was the first country in the world to reserve a proportion of a couple’s parental leave for the father. When the six ‘daddy weeks’ were introduced in 1993, men’s parental leave rates rose dramatically. Prior to the reform, less than four per cent of Norwegian fathers went on parental leave. A few years later, the figure was over 70 per cent. The number of weeks reserved for fathers was subsequently increased, and eventually amounted to 14 weeks in 2013. The following year, the government reduced the number to 10 weeks, with the argument to increase the freedom of parents to make their own choices.

When the shared parental insurance was introduced in Sweden in 1974, the advocates were aiming for a more gender-equal distribution of parental leave. However, the effect failed to appear: men’s parental leave rates remained close to zero despite the opportunity to share the time spent at home. It was not until the earmarking of a certain number of months for fathers that any change occurred. In 2016, the parental leave reserved for the father was extended from two to three months. Today,



Sweden is the Nordic country with the longest period of parental leave that can be shared freely between the parents.

### Rates of parental leave climbing among Finnish and Danish men

In 2003, Finland introduced a ‘daddy month’ – one month of parental leave reserved for the father. Further change occurred in 2013, enabling Finnish fathers to take a total of nine weeks of parental leave up until the child turns two years old: three weeks together with the mother and six weeks reserved for only him. The reform

has had noticeable effects. In 2015, a total of 65 485 Finnish dads received parental benefit – 11 per cent more than in the previous year.

Denmark introduced two weeks of parental leave reserved for the father in 1998. This raised men’s rates of parental leave drastically; the highest recorded proportion of fathers taking paid parental leave in subsequent years was 36 per cent. In 2002, the earmarking of parental leave for fathers was abolished, also here with the argument to increase parents’ freedom to choose. This change led to a reduction in parental leave among fathers. Today men’s proportion of the shareable parental leave days is climbing. According to Tine Rostgaard, professor at the Danish Institute of Local Governmental Research, this trend is partly due to changing norms, where men are inspired by other men. Another reason is that an increasing number of employers are including the right to paternal leave in their collective agreements.

### Men take the part of the parental leave that is reserved for them

The share of couples’ allotted parental leave that is taken by the father has increased in all Nordic countries since 2000, albeit very slowly. All of the countries allow parents to divide some of the total parental leave any way they want, but in reality this portion is almost exclusively taken by the mother. Countries with earmarked ‘daddy days’ have the highest levels of gender equality in the distribution of parental leave. An additional factor affecting men’s propensity to go on parental leave is the level of compensation, which in a global perspective is high in several Nordic countries.

**The distribution of days**

- Parents’ entitlement to paid parental leave varies across the Nordic countries. Sweden offers the longest period of paid leave: 70 weeks. Finland and Denmark offer 50 weeks. In Norway, parents can stay home for 59 weeks, whereas Icelandic parents get 40 weeks.
- Denmark is the only country that does not reserve a part of the parental leave period for the father, while Iceland and Sweden reserve three months, Norway 10 weeks and Finland six weeks.
- All Nordic countries except Iceland offer paternal leave that can be taken at the same time as the mother stays home with the child following the delivery. This period amounts to two weeks in Sweden, Norway and Denmark and three weeks in Finland.

# Limited research on families outside the norm

**The Nordic parental insurance system is based on a traditional heterosexual family norm, according to researcher Ann-Zofie Duvander. This can make the system complex or even dysfunctional for non-traditional families, such as single-parent households and rainbow families.**

The existing research on the Nordic parental insurance systems tends to focus on general patterns, such as how the systems are designed and how the design affects the way parents use the systems. However, there is very limited research on how the parental insurance works for various groups.

— For example, we don't know much about how immigrants and low-income families have reacted to the legislative changes that have made the parental insurance more individualized and less couple oriented, says Ann-Zofie Duvander, associate professor of demography and senior lecturer at Stockholm University's Department of Sociology in Sweden.

She points out that the Nordic parental insurance systems are based on a two-parent norm, which can cause problems for families with fewer or more parents. For example, in Finland, only dads who live together with their child are entitled to paid parental leave, making the system ill-suited for parents who live apart. In Norway, the parental benefit is based on the mother. She must have worked prior to the birth of a child, or else she is excluded from the system and only qualifies for a single payment in connection with the delivery of the baby. This also affects the father's right to parental benefit. In Sweden, the system is based on the assumption that parents are able to collaborate, which can be

problematic if they disagree. Each parent is entitled to half of the total parental leave assigned for a child. If for example a father, in a heterosexual relationship, does not want to make use of all of his allotted days of paid parental leave, he can transfer them to the mother, or else the total number of days granted for the child will be reduced accordingly. In this situation, the earmarked paternal leave can have undesired consequences.

— If the dad neither makes use of his allotted days nor transfers them to the mum, eight months of parental leave will be lost. This in turn means that the parental leave period will end before the child can start pre-school, which may affect the mother financially if she is forced to rely on unpaid leave from work in order to care for her child, says Ann-Zofie Duvander.



ILLUSTRATION: EMMA HANQUIST

## SOURCES:

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This fact sheet is produced in 2016 by NIKK, Nordic Information on Gender, which is a Nordic cooperative body under the Nordic Council of Ministers. It explains how the national parental insurance systems in the Nordic countries affect paid parental leave among fathers. The fact sheet is based on both reports and interviews with researchers.

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