

# The level of the couple: How parents make decisions on the distribution of parental leave

Dr.<sup>in</sup> Karin Sardadvar (FORBA)

Dr.<sup>in</sup> Ingrid Mairhuber (FORBA)

„Men and Reconciliation of Work and Family: Supporting the Path to Gender Equal Distribution of Parental Leave and Working Time“



Supported by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship  
Programme of the European Union (2014 – 2020)

# Background and research questions

- Parents often envisage a **more egalitarian distribution** of childcare than they finally **put into practice**
- How does this **difference between plans and reality** come about?
- **Subproject:** The **couple** as level of analysis
- **Research question:** How do parents perceive, negotiate and explain their distribution of childcare?
- Presentation today: Focus on **parental leave** / use of childcare allowance and **paternity leave**

# Data

- **Literature review:** International research on negotiations and distribution of childcare in couples
- **Empirical research: 10 qualitative case studies**
  - Interviews with both partners at two points in time
  - Before and after birth, important changes in parental leave, working times etc.
  - What has changed and why?
  - Second round of interviews and analyses currently in progress

# Case studies

The **ten couples** selected vary with regard to several **characteristics**:

- **Region:** Austrian province, urban/rural
- **Sector:** Focus on male-dominated sectors
- **Company size:** Large, medium and small enterprises
- **Formal education:** Vocational training, secondary school, university
- **Arrangement:** Parental leave model, parental part-time, daddy's month, sabbatical

# Childcare allowance: Share of fathers

Childcare allowance model	Percentage of men
30+6 months	10,7
20+4 months	17,7
15+3 months	25,7
12+2 months – flat rate	29,6
12+2 months – income-related	30,6
<b>Overall</b>	<b>19,4</b>

Updated: 21.4.2017

# Childcare allowance: Duration of fathers' use

Childcare allowance model	Duration of fathers' use 2015
30+6 months	ca. 7,7 months
20+4 months	ca. 5,1 months
15+3 months	ca. 4,1 months
12+2 months – flat rate	ca. 3,4 months
12+2 months – income-related	ca. 2,6 months

# Who “owns” the parental leave? Who is in charge?

- Fathers' leave: **an option**
- Mothers' leave: **a duty and a matter of course** (Bekkengen 2002)
- **Ambivalent pattern:**
  - Mother as “**owner**” of the leave who gives a part to the partner (Almquist et al. 2011; McKay/Doucet 2010; Ehnis 2008)
  - But: Mothers **do not insist** and **remain in charge** if fathers opt out
  - Mothers have the **final say** but also the overall **responsibility**  
(Ehnis 2008; Peukert 2015; Possinger 2013)

# Who “owns” the parental leave? Who is in charge?

## Case study examples

- **Case study selection:** Intention of **father’s participation** as criterion
- Yet: In **all cases**, mothers use the larger part of the leave and have the main responsibility for it
- **Example case 10:** Father refers to the parental leave as a “**gift**” his wife made to him
- **Example case 1:** Mother approves of fathers’ leave, but leaves it to her partner whether he takes it or not



# Who “owns” the parental leave?

## Who is in charge?

- **Fathers' employment:** Actual or anticipated disadvantages for career or job security
  - Men reflect thoroughly how taking leave would **impact their employment**
  - Important basis for **decision-making**  
(Bygren/Duvander 2006; Vogt/Pull 2010; McKay/Doucet 2010; Possinger 2013; Mairhuber et al. 2010; Wagner-Pinter 2014; Dechant/Schulz 2014)
- **Mothers' employment:** Women hope that their employment situation will turn out fine anyway
  - Even in cases of **long leave** or a **long duration of part-time work** with few hours
  - The **fact *that* they will take leave** is not a matter of decision

# Expected negative effects of leave

- **Rush hour of life:** parenthood overlaps with career steps  
→ parents forced to **set priorities**
- Case study pattern: Fathers withdraw from parental leave because they **expect** consequences, **before** they possibly experience them  
(Bygren/Duvander 2006; Vogt/Pull 2010; McKay/Doucet 2010; Possinger 2013; Mairhuber et al. 2010. Wagner-Pinter 2014; Dechant/Schulz 2014)
- **Important analytical differences:**
  - **Expected vs. experienced** negative effects of parental leave
  - What kind of effects? **Job loss vs. career steps**
- **Mothers' leave** has always had **negative effects**, too – but women hardly have the option to decide against taking leave

# Case study example

Mister J. is a technical employee who took **two months leave**. He works in the **same company** as his wife. He perceives **his absence as more difficult** than hers.

*„Well, I think four months is rather a limit. (...) If I took 36+6 months, there would of course be the question whether I can come back. For her, it wasn't a job-related problem apparently.“*

# Case study example

Mister A. took leave with his first child. With his second child, he **decided against taking leave** although it had been planned. The reasons were **restructuring processes** in his company and possible **career steps**.

*„Yes, and with the projects I don't know what effects it would have if I went on leave in the middle of the talks.“*

Nobody told him explicitly that his first leave had been a problem, but he reacts upon **implicit evidence**.

*„That's it, nobody told me anything, but I noticed it ...“*

# Income gap: An important explanation – and its limits

- **Gender pay gap** influences the distribution of paid and unpaid work in couples – and the other way around
- **Closing the gender pay gap** is a crucial measure for promoting an equal share of childcare
- **But:**
  - Economic aspects should **not be overestimated** (Trappe 2013)
  - If couples have **similar incomes**, economic aspects are less influential (Almqvist 2006; Almqvist et al. 2011)
  - Qualitative research findings: Parents refer to financial arguments in **contradictory ways** (Nentwich 2000; Schmidt et al. 2015; Peukert 2015)

# Income gap: An important explanation – and its limits

**Financial arguments in couples are not coherent (Nentwich 2000):**

- **Arbitrary interpretation of arguments:**
  - The same arguments are interpreted in different ways
  
- **Contextuality of arguments:**
  - Some aspects are only made relevant in some contexts, but are left out in others

# Income gap: An important explanation – and its limits

**Case study findings** reflect previous qualitative evidence:

(Bekkengen 2002; Ehnis 2009; Nentwich 2000; Peukert 2015; Schmidt et al. 2015, Almquist 2008)

- **If the man in a couple earns more:**
  - Income becomes important argument for fathers' taking no or less parental leave
  
- **If both partners earn the same or woman earns more:**
  - Income is not referred to, other arguments become relevant (breastfeeding, construction of gendered parenting competences etc.)

# Motives for taking fathers' leave

Sources: Pfahl/Reuyß 2008; Richter 2012; Kapella et al. 2011a; Possinger 2013; Holzinger et al. 2014; McKay/Doucet 2010; Almquist et al. 2006

Type of motives	Focus	Case study pattern
Family-related motives	Parental leave as family time	Father on leave together with the mother
Child-related motives	Relationship to the child	Less present and brought forward primarily by mothers (with regard to fathers)
Partner-related motives	Supporting the partner	Paternity leave (“Daddy’s weeks”)
Self-related motives	Experiencing fatherhood	Leave as a break from employment



# Parental leave as “family time“

- **Parental leave as “family time“** (summer, vacation, with partner) (Pfahl/Reuyß 2008; Richter 2012; Kapella et al. 2011a)
- **Case studies: “family time“ as empirical pattern:** Man on leave, woman in short part-time
- There is an **empirical desire** for such a family time, but it is questionable what this means for **gender equality** or **long-term redistribution** of care and housework
- **Data on use of childcare allowance** and paternal leave: does not say whether father takes over main responsibility

# “Daddy’s weeks”/paternity leave

- Contrary to parental leave: Paternity leave in case studies also ***demand***ed **by mothers**, supporting the mother is main motive also for fathers (McKay/Doucet 2010)
- Case studies: **High need for paternity leave**, in some family’s social context it has become **normal** to take daddy’s weeks
- **Fathers improvise to organise daddy’s week**: vacation days, nursing leave, unpaid special leave, financial support by own parents, etc.
- **Political framework lags behind** fathers’ readiness to involve and **empirical reality**
- “Family month” in **new Austrian childcare allowance regulation**: important step, but no legal entitlement, low income substitution, and deducted from childcare allowance

# Leave as a welcome opportunity to interrupt employment

- Empirical pattern: Leave and parental part-time correspond to a general **desire for a time-out from work** (fathers but also mothers)
- **Strong motive** for taking parental leave or part-time for fathers
- At the core are the desire to **experience fatherhood** and **shift the focus away from employment** (less: the child's welfare or gender equality)
- What does this imply for **political measures and communication** regarding parental leave and part-time for fathers?
- It could be fruitful to **connect discourses on fatherhood and changing working (time) preferences** of men

# Childcare versus housework

- Taking over childcare does not imply taking over housework (Sardadvar 2002; Almquist et al. 2006)
- Case studies: Housework hardly mentioned, not “part of the picture”
- Case studies: **Separate housework responsibilities** for man and woman; **outsourcing** if possible; **main responsibility** rests with woman (Sardadvar 2002; Almquist et al 2006; Dechant/Schulz 2014; Wengler et al. 2009; Bünning 2015)
- **Duration of parental leave** correlates with **involvement in housework**. Prerequisite: More than two months of parental leave, woman (full-time) employed (Bünning 2015)



BUNDESMINISTERIUM  
FÜR ARBEIT, SOZIALES  
UND KONSUMENTENSCHUTZ



MINISTERIUM  
FRAUEN  
GESUNDHEIT



OGGB



FORBA

