

Liberation of Mothers through Fatherhood CSW and the Nordic model of paternity leave

Richard Bygge



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Women's economic empowerment is the theme of this year's UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). What can men do to help? Take some time off work for starters.

About a year back, the phrase "gay nannies" circulated on Twitter and other social media outlets, occasionally accompanied by a man carrying a small child. Supposedly, this came from an incredulous American turning to his colleague while visiting Sweden and asking "What's up with all the gay nannies?"

Matter of fact, the "gay nannies," were actually fathers on paternity leave, but the idea that men would want, or even afford to, take parental leave is presented as such a foreign concept in the U.S. such a foreign concept that the asker defaults to the assumption that they are all nannies. As to why they would necessarily have to be gay to complete the picture, well that clearly speaks of other underlying assumptions latent in our society.

to new parents, most fathers choose to take 90 days, which is the bare minimum quota granted to both parents by law (those days being lost if left unused). Only around 14 percent of couples divide the allotted time equally. Nevertheless, the above number would be regarded as astounding among other countries, where 90 days accounts for the maximum limit for paternal leave, including the United States (where, additionally, it is usually unpaid).

Despite the lack of embracement, the idea has been addressed in several occasions. On International Women's Day, the 8th of March, Oscar-awarded actress Anne Hathaway took the podium to deliver an address about paid parental leave at the UN. Rightfully, she chose to focus not only on maternity leave, but also paternity leave as well, arguing "In order to liberate women, we need to liberate men" (unwomen.org).

On March 13, 2017, five days after Ms. Hathaway's

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It is highly probable that this line was never actually delivered by an American, though it does make for an amusing anecdote. It seems to be one of those lines that periodically surface on social media and then rapidly gains widespread traction on the Internet because it resonates with an image of Americans' apparent ignorance, regardless of being justified or not.

Still, the fact that it got the traction does speak to an unspoken truth: paternity leave as a concept or policy is seen as all but unfathomable in the United States. Indeed, the idea would be met with puzzlement in a large part of the world whereas, assuming parental leave exists as a policy at all, maternity leave is seen as the natural option. Even in Sweden, with its supposed deluge of "gay nannies," parental leave is far from being equally distributed between the genders. Though a total of 480 days of paid leave are afforded

speech, the Commission on the Status of Women, as part of its ongoing 61st conference, hosted an event on the Nordic model of equality. As pointed out during the event, the Nordic countries are often held up as exemplars of gender equality, topping several global league tables on women's rights and wellbeing lists, including the Save the Children's Girls' Opportunity Index and the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. The Nordic states' welfare state model is, according to CSW speaker Lynn Roseberry, one of the underlying reasons for high levels of gender equality: uniquely, the gender aspect is almost always taken into consideration whenever any major welfare reforms take place, and equality between the genders is closely intertwined with the Nordic ideology on welfare. Today, paid parental leave plays an integral part in this model, including for the fathers in all the Nordic countries with the exception of Denmark.

Of course, as event moderator Brigid Schulte remarked, despite the glowing reviews and the undeniable feeling that something is clearly going right amongst the Nordics, there are some incongruities. The gender pay gap still remains an underlying issue and, perhaps surprisingly, there are fewer women in Sweden who occupy high positions within the labor market than in the United States. Despite the many successes, Dr. Mari Teigen, a speaker at CWS, pointed to a feeling of pervasive stagnation that has gripped gender advocacy amongst the Nordics. There is a growing sense that gender advocates have grown complacent in the region and the issues that remain unaddressed, such as the aforementioned pay gap that was highlighted at this year's CSW where the predominant theme has been women's economic empowerment, receive little attention since the problem is perceived as 'solved'. But in actual fact the hoped for ripple effect of some policies, such as paternity leave, have not been as far-reaching as people believe; true gender equality remains an unachieved ambition.

Even so, at first glance, the introduction or expansion of gender-neutral, paid parental leave policies appears to be a boon for families. For the mother, the downsides of being put in the role as the only viable stay-at-home parent are obvious: they may be forced to choose between their careers and being a mother. A stay-at-home mother may be pushed into the role of an economic dependent, having to rely on her spouse as the household's sole breadwinner.

Moreover, the assumption that women may choose motherhood over their career may even harm those who have no intention of having children (as well as those who wish to adopt already grown children) due to the deeply rooted social mores that suggests that many women will eventually become mothers. Such an assumption can make men a more attractive option as employees, since there is a lower risk that they might step away from the workplace down the line, making them a more reliable investment. The so-called 'motherhood penalty', or how working mothers are disadvantaged in the workplace, can afflict any woman and put up hurdles which are not faced by their male counterparts.

It is not the aim of this article to diminish motherhood to merely an obstacle to economic liberation. As long as it is entered into willingly, motherhood is a

marvelous thing. But so, many will likely agree, is fatherhood. Fathers are by no means exempt from suffering detrimental effects due to the reigning gender dichotomy on parental leave. Not only are men often deprived of the opportunity to be a major presence in their children's life, especially during the early stages, but they are also likely to shoulder the burden of being the household's sole breadwinner in what can only be called economically volatile times the world over.

Being the breadwinner can be an incredibly stressful role to undertake alone where before they had likely shared the burden with their spouse, particularly for young men who have turned into fathers for the first time. Depression is not uncommon and is affecting more men, as shown by studies by organizations such as the American Academy in Pediatrics and the Medical Research Council in the UK (American Academy in Pediatrics; Medical Research Council). At the same time, the Nordic representatives at the CWS pointed to domestic studies that show the benefits paternity leave has on men's confidence and mental health, and how it helps fathers to develop the so-called 'caregiver competence' in parallel with the mother.

This means that, in the absence of paternity leave, children are not only deprived of those early opportunities of getting to know their fathers to the same extent that they know their mothers, but it can also have a detrimental effect on their relationship for years if not for life. Therefore, a more gender-neutral take on parental leave would not simply be beneficial to women. Indeed, the benefits of a paternity leave policy would be many and varied for both genders, and paternity leave certainly should not be viewed as an instrument meant to emasculate men who recently turned into fathers. Nevertheless, it is plausible that it might be viewed in such a light due to the prevalent societal norms that surround the issue.

There are other hurdles to overcome. The United States is the sole remaining high income country where the much more common and socially accepted maternity leave goes unpaid (or even entirely unavailable beyond perhaps a few weeks postpartum) in this manner, it seems like the notion of implementing paid paternity leave might seem too big a leap for family norms to handle. The more immediate concern could possibly be the fact that mothers need to be ensured

income and job position recovery after the initial weeks of their newborn lives. Yet this seems like an unnecessary, if not directly harmful stopover: if the idea of paid parental leave in general came to be accepted practice, it would remove one factor as to why men are so hesitant about taking the leap into the role of fathers as opposed to being the primary breadwinners. Furthermore, the fact that only mothers can take their paid leave while barring such an option for fathers could potentially exacerbate the prevailing gender imbalance, since mothers would have an additional reason to stay at home while further pressure would be put on the father to stay at work to guarantee that no benefits are lost. Such circumstances, a strange sort of dark side to generous maternity-exclusive leave policies, could potentially further exacerbate the damage to a woman's career opportunities. "In order to liberate women, we need to liberate men", indeed.

Ironically, the issue is even more essential in countries that have implemented generous parental leave

the state for getting involved in what is seen as a private family affair, not the least in the United States.

Throughout the talks held in the commission it has become clear that paternity leave is not a miracle solution, and the policy's supposed ripple effect on gender equality in the labor market has been more limited than might have been initially expected. Dr. Teigen suggested that, if paternity leave had been, or will be in the future, a part of a larger push for gender equality across the labor market, its effects might have been more far reaching. For instance, even now, it is common practice for employers to talk with expecting mothers about what kind of circumstances they can expect now that a child enters the picture and how her work might be affected. A similar practice for men, and how a child or parental leave might affect their work, remains curiously absent. Again, the subconscious gender bias is not so easily dispelled or abandoned.

On the other hand, it is worth keeping in mind that simply one generation ago, no fathers in the Nordic

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systems, as mothers feel incentivized to take advantage from such systems while expecting fathers to maintain their employment, furthering the gender gap rather than closing it. As pointed out at the event, there is currently an ongoing debate in Sweden and Norway whether the system already in place should have more incentives to encourage a more equal division of the generous parental leave provisions. Alternatively, simply extending the quota of parent-specific days beyond the already allotted 90 has been bandied about, but there is the issue whether forcing fathers to take leave from work is a solution. Societal norms often need a push to change, and the gender norms have proven to be considerably more resistant than most, but some fathers might grow resentful towards

countries would even consider the idea of taking parental leave. This current generation of fathers are the first to make use of it, and even if only 14 percent choose to divide the allotted time equitably, it is still a meteoric rise even if it may sometime feel glacial. Something is happening. It may not be enough on its own, but it is an important part of the general push towards gender equality in the labor market.

As a final argument, it has often been said that for women to achieve the same level of empowerment as men, economic or in other spheres, male allies are needed. Yet, there is a potential pitfall when it comes

to engaging them, and that is to enlist men in the role of protectors. A guardian to safeguard women's interest is a modern take on the ancient practice of male stewardship. Nonetheless, a policy of paid paternity leave to complement maternity leave would not lead to such a dynamic. On the contrary, it would serve as a step towards balancing the roles of men and women as parents and caretakers, eventually leading to more equal and harmonious prospects both in the workplace and in the family.

Surely that is a goal worth striving for, a conclusion which has been seemingly reached by the CSW during its 61st conference. Among the agreed upon conclusions, the CSW has affirmed its intent to, as part of its promotion of policies for women's economic empowerment, recognize the significance of paid paternity leave and fatherhood in children's upbringing and the need to counter discrimination against parents who would avail themselves to benefits afforded for social security purposes. Whether this will result in concrete policy making down the line still remains unsolved. The idea of paternity leave has been raised on previous occasions, as for instance during the 58th conference in 2014 and even tentatively raised as far back as 1996 during the 40th session when the CSW expressed its will to encourage incentives that would enable men as well as women to take parental leave. But the 61st session has undoubtedly been the first conference that explicitly makes mention of paid "paternity leave" as a stated goal. It is promising that further attention has been called to it and the positive effect it can have on women's prospects in the labor market, even if the road to actually get to that the aimed point may be long.

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