

## **Caring inequality in UK politics and policy**

Briefing note for the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy  
Duncan Fisher, August 2019

**Disclaimer:** This paper was commissioned by the Women's Budget Group to inform the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy. An input to the Commission, it has been written by an independent author and should not be taken to represent the views of the Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy or the Women's Budget Group.

Inequality in caring underpins all other forms of gender inequality, including the pay gap. Until we see progress in this aspect of equality, gender inequality as a whole is unachievable. Progress has been severely lacking in the past 10 years, to the point of paralysis.

### **Caring by fathers brings wellbeing and equity**

The 'wellbeing economy' that Scotland is pursuing prioritises human wellbeing and equity. Supporting the caring role of men forms a part of this endeavour.

When fathers contribute more to the care of children and contribute more equally to housework, then:

- Mothers experience lower levels of stress and depression<sup>1</sup>, better health after the birth<sup>2</sup>, happier family relationships<sup>3</sup>, higher earnings and career advancement<sup>3</sup>.
- Child development is enhanced - cognitive and social/emotional<sup>4</sup>.
- Fathers develop greater commitment, attachment and responsiveness to their children<sup>5</sup>, are happier with the time spent with their families<sup>6</sup>, are less likely to experience separation/divorce<sup>7</sup> and live longer<sup>8</sup>.

### **The current work/life situation is beset with problems**

Fathers experience work/life stress. According to the Modern Families Index 2018<sup>9</sup>:

- 42% of millennial fathers are likely to take pay cut to work fewer hours within next 2 years (mothers: 31%)

---

<sup>1</sup> Fisher JRW, Cabral de Mello M, Patel V & Rahman A (2006), Maternal depression and newborn health. Newsletter for the Partnership of Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, 2. Geneva: World Health Organisation; Pilkington PD, Milne LC, Cairns KE, Lewis J & Whelan TA (2015), Modifiable partner factors associated with perinatal depression and anxiety: a systematic review and meta-analysis, *Journal of Affective Disorders* 178

<sup>2</sup> Persson P & Rossin-Slater M (2019), When dad can stay at home: Fathers' workplace flexibility and maternal health, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research

<sup>3</sup> Contained in a full review of evidence: Burgess A & Davies J (2017), Cash or Carry? Fathers combining work and care in the UK, Contemporary Fathers in the UK series, Fatherhood Institute

<sup>4</sup> Lamb ME (2010), *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition

<sup>5</sup> Goodman JH (2004), Paternal postpartum depression, its relationship to maternal postpartum depression, and implications for family health, *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 45.1; Gray PB & Anderson KG (2010), *Fatherhood: Evolution and Human Paternal Behavior*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Haas L & Hwang CP (2008), The impact of taking parental leave on fathers' participation in childcare and relationships with children: Lessons from Sweden, *Community, Work & Family* 11.1; Feldman R, Sussman AL & Zigler E (2004), Parental leave and work adaptation at the transition to parenthood: Individual, marital and social correlates, *Applied Developmental Psychology* 25

<sup>7</sup> Oláh L (2001), Policy changes and family stability: the Swedish case, *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 15

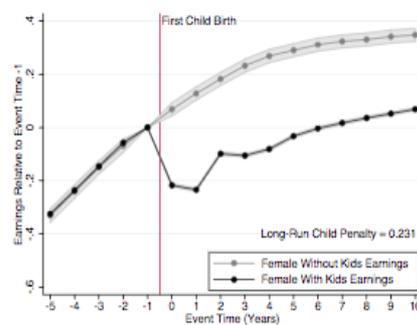
<sup>8</sup> Månsdotter A, Backhans M & Hallqvist J (2008), The relationship between a less gender-stereotypical parenthood and alcohol-related care and death: A registry study of Swedish mothers and fathers, *BMC Public Health* 8; Månsdotter A, Lindholm L & Winkvist A (2007), Paternity leave in Sweden: Costs, savings and health gains, *Health Policy* 82.1

<sup>9</sup> [www.workingfamilies.org.uk/publications/mfindex2018](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/publications/mfindex2018)

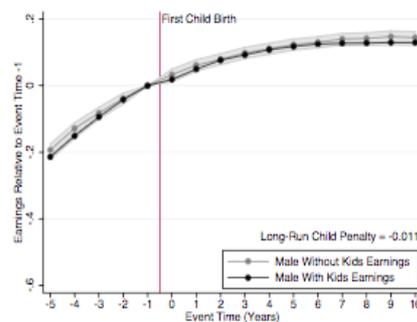
- 48% are likely to choose less stressful work within next two years (mothers: 31%)
- 46% feel resentful against employer about work time
- 48% have lied to employer – e.g. faking sick – to meet family obligations (mothers: 30%)

Mothers experience a motherhood income penalty compared to non-mothers, whereas fathers do not experience this. Data from Denmark reveal the pattern clearly<sup>10</sup>. A 30% gender pay gap opens up for mothers immediately having a first child, after which things improve slightly, but it stays at roughly 20% for the next 10 years.

**A: Women Who Have Children vs Women Who Don't**  
Earnings Impact



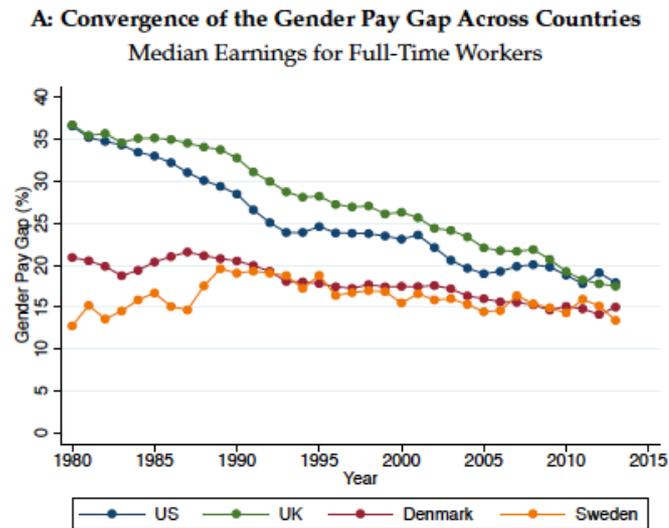
**B: Men Who Have Children vs Men Who Don't**  
Earnings Impact



This data is presented as a response to the observation that the pay gaps in UK, USA, Denmark and Sweden are all converging towards the same point, 15-25%, and stubbornly settling there. The proposed explanation is the continued unequal sharing of caring responsibilities, which is not moving.

<sup>10</sup> Kleven H, Landais C & Sogaard JE (2018), Children and gender inequality: Evidence from Denmark, NBER Working Paper 24219

Figure 1: Gender Gaps Across Countries 1980-2013



There is no evidence of a “fatherhood premium” – a reward for men having children simply because they are men. There is some evidence, on the contrary, that lower income men earn less as a result of fatherhood<sup>11</sup>. Men who choose to downsize at work in order to care, experience an income drop like mothers do, but this is obscured by the experience being called a “motherhood” penalty.

The leave entitlement system in the UK is deeply unequal in its design:

- A mother on the average wage (£27,000) is entitled to £7,703 (6 weeks at 90% pay and 33 weeks at £148.68). A father is entitled to £297 (2 weeks at £148.68), which is 26 times less. Meanwhile, employers who top up statutory maternity pay are making things even more unequal. A 2017 survey of 341 companies<sup>12</sup> found 95% enhanced maternity pay, often to a significant extent, but only 4.4% enhanced paternity pay for even part of the two weeks.
- “Shared parental leave” is actually an option for mothers to transfer some of their (low-paid) maternity leave to fathers. The rights and responsibilities associated with the leave are mothers’ alone. Of the 37% of couples who are actually eligible for this transfer of leave from the mother to the father, very few have used it. The total uptake of this leave among all families is estimated to be around 1%.
- This is an astonishingly low level of use of leave by fathers by international standards. While fathers rarely use transferred maternity leave, they do use parental leave when available on the same paid basis as for mothers. Use by fathers of parental leave in Iceland is 91%, in Quebec is 86% and in Portugal is 63%<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this, see Cash or Carry – see footnote 3 above.

<sup>12</sup> [www.xperthr.co.uk/survey-analysis/maternity-and-paternity-leave-and-pay-survey-2017/162374/](http://www.xperthr.co.uk/survey-analysis/maternity-and-paternity-leave-and-pay-survey-2017/162374/)

<sup>13</sup> [www.leavenetwork.org/leave-policies-research/country-reports](http://www.leavenetwork.org/leave-policies-research/country-reports). See also Blum S, Koslowski A, Macht A & Moss P (Eds.), International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2018, available at [www.leavenetwork.org](http://www.leavenetwork.org).

## Proposals for gender equal policies in UK

The first priority is to make the parenting leave system equal:

- Eligibility for paternity/maternity leave: 15 weeks with the same employer for fathers as it is for mothers, not 41 weeks as it is for fathers at present.
- Statutory Paternity Allowance for self-employed and non-eligible fathers, the same as for mothers.
- Abolish Shared Parental Leave and replace with a system in which leave in the first year is split in three equal tranches – one third for the mother, one third for the father and one third that either can take (typically, mothers will take the first three-to-six months as they recover from the birth and breastfeed exclusively, with fathers taking their leave later in the year).
- Enhance pay for fathers' leave as for mothers'. Cap both at a certain maximum. Currently enhanced pay for maternity leave is not capped for high earners.
- Employers should publish gender leave statistics, as they do gender pay statistics.

Experience from other countries shows that changing work/life policies to allow sharing leads to big and rapid change in how care is shared, as latent demand is met.

Once this extreme inequality is removed, other policy changes may be considered, such as:

- Introduce the Swedish “Double Days” into the parental leave system, allowing fathers to be at home not just for the first 10 days after the birth of a child, but also up to 30 more days during the first year *while the mother is still at home*. These parental leave days can be taken at any time and in any combination, including as single days off., meaning fathers can be available more often to help at difficult moments. This has been shown to have significant health benefits for women despite very sparing use.<sup>14</sup>
- Integrate parental leave with early education and childcare. The UK has a large gap between the end of parenting leave and the start of an entitlement to early childhood education and care services.
- Challenge full-time working culture that forces separation of gender roles.
- Develop support for men caring for their children and support for co-parenting. The parent support system is designed for mothers. Support for fathers leads to improved outcomes for mothers and children<sup>15</sup> and needs to be designed differently from support for mothers.
- Move towards a more universal system of “leave to care” that recognises the need for both women and men to find a balance between care and employment across the lifespan. An example is the Belgian time credit system<sup>16</sup>.
- Move away from the idea of ‘leave from work’ contingent on meeting certain conditions, to an unconditional ‘leave to care’. A leave that recognises the rights of

---

<sup>14</sup> Persson P & Rossin-Slater M (2019), [When dad can stay at home: Fathers' workplace flexibility and maternal health](#), Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research

<sup>15</sup> For a collection of 300 research reports on this theme, see [familyincluded.com](http://familyincluded.com).

<sup>16</sup> [www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/k\\_leavenetwork/country\\_notes/2018/FINAL.Belgium2018.pdf](http://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/country_notes/2018/FINAL.Belgium2018.pdf)

care-givers, female and male, and of care-receivers, and the importance of achieving an equal and sustainable relationship between care, employment and gender.

What about breastfeeding? A key concern about shared leave taking is that it might reduce breastfeeding as fathers 'take over'. There is no evidence for this. Indeed the evidence points the other way<sup>17</sup>: sharing leave is linked with sharing of responsibilities and teamwork within the family - and these are linked to more breastfeeding. "Breastfeeding as teamwork" is a new concept launched through this year's World Breastfeeding Week<sup>18</sup>.

### **Why making proposals for policies has not worked**

The proposals above are not original. They have been made repeatedly for 10 years. The problem is not lack of well-evidenced policy proposals – the problem is the lack of response to them. The muted response to the failed shared leave system is a cause for some careful reflection.

There is much more conversation about fatherhood now and positive images abound on social media. (For light relief, see *11 viral videos of fathers with their babies and children: with 0.4 billion views between them*<sup>19</sup>.)

However, policies and politics in this area have been paralysed for over a decade. Barriers include:

- The male provider idea - male full-time working remains the norm and is not being displaced by men's growing aspirations to be involved in caring for their children.
- The idea that the male role is to be strong and to support, not to receive support<sup>20</sup> and not to appear weak. Fathers focus on self-reliance, not on advocating to be helped more. (In current circumstances, the focus on self-reliance is a rational strategy.)
- The idea that women are better than men at caring. The loving mother ideal has deep emotional vibrancy.
- The idea that fathers are less interested in child welfare than mothers are. This lies behind the idea that breastfeeding might diminish if men 'take over'.
- The idea that men have unconstrained agency, so that lack of action is their fault, not the system's. For example, the normal question about shared leave is "why don't men take leave?" rather than "why don't women share their leave?" / "why does the shared leave system not work?" Alison Koslowski at Edinburgh University argues the need to examine fathers' "capabilities" to use current systems<sup>21</sup>.

---

<sup>17</sup> For a collection of reports on evidence since 2015, see [familyincluded.com/category/breastfeeding](http://familyincluded.com/category/breastfeeding)

<sup>18</sup> [worldbreastfeedingweek.org/](http://worldbreastfeedingweek.org/)

<sup>19</sup> [familyincluded.com/viral-videos-fathers-bonding](http://familyincluded.com/viral-videos-fathers-bonding)

<sup>20</sup> Research on fathers in neonatal care affords an interesting perspective in the case of situations of extreme stress and need. Fisher D, Khashu M, Adama EA, Feeley N, Garfield CF, Ireland J, Koliouli F, Lindberg B, Nørgaard B, Provenzi L, Thomson-Salo F, van Teijlingen E (2018), Fathers in neonatal units: Improving infant health by supporting the baby-father bond and mother-father coparenting, *Journal of Neonatal Nursing*

<sup>21</sup> Koslowski A & Kadar-Satat G (2018), [Fathers at work: Explaining the gaps between entitlement to leave and uptake](#), *Community, Work & Family* 22.2

These beliefs all lead towards the idea that the problem is men and that the solution is for them to change. This takes away the focus from system change, which is where the real problem lies.

The debate about sharing of care in UK is highly restricted. When a piece on the topic of this briefing was published in The Guardian<sup>22</sup>, reader comments reflected exasperation:

- I'm glad this topic is (finally) brought up, thank you!
- I'm amazed you managed to get this published.
- Hard to believe this one slipped through. Good Article.
- Of the daily gender based articles I see in the paper this is the first one that's made this case.
- I haven't seen too many opinion pieces on the inequality of this in the Guardian but maybe it will change.
- It's good to see this issue of inequality being brought up, it rarely gets a mention.
- Thank you for this long-overdue article. I am sick of hearing commentators bemoan the low uptake of shared parental leave by fathers, yet ignore the showstopping fact that "shared parental pay" is crap compared to maternity pay.
- Great to see an article that for once isn't pillorying fathers but rather takes a realistic look at what the obstacles to taking more time with their kids actually are.

### **Raising awareness of gender care inequality is a precursor to policy change**

If the Commission just makes recommendations for policy changes, it will have no more impact than 10 years of similar activity.

A precursor to policy change is a proper public debate and wider awareness of the problems.

A new discussion about caring would attract new participants to the debate about gender inequality, millennial parents in particular. Engaging more men in the debate about gender equality has long been seen as desirable and this is an opportunity to achieve that. A debate that highlights the emerging social norm of men's everyday caring for children would help to spread this social norm and increase user pressure on outdated policies.

Efforts to promote sharing of care in other countries have been led by feminists with the same outlook as we see on the Commission – analytical, economic and objective. It will be easier to do this than it was in these other countries last century because the culture of active fatherhood is now much better established globally.

---

<sup>22</sup> Want men to share parental leave? Just give them equality. Duncan Fisher, Feb 2018. [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/15/men-share-parental-leave-entitlement-women-equality-fathers](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/15/men-share-parental-leave-entitlement-women-equality-fathers)