

# **CHILDCARE AND FATHERHOOD: SCANDINAVIAN PERSPECTIVES**

BY Yvonne BEKENY, MA, Development & Cooperation

The Scandinavian countries in the strict sense of the word refer to Denmark, Sweden and Norway. However, in this researched paper, I have also referred to Finland and in some cases Iceland, as part of the Scandinavian countries. This is because in Ellingsater & Leira (2006) which I have used as a reference book, they have referred to them as such. These are the countries in the Northern part of Europe which share close historical and cultural connections. They are welfare states which assume total responsibility for the welfare of their citizens

The Scandinavian countries are reputable in their work and family policies that promote gender equality and through these policies, provide more services and benefits for households and therefore lessening the burdens of families. Such welfare and care services facilitate the employment of women in these countries (Leira in Ellingsater & Leira, 2006). Leira further states that fathers as well as mothers are presumed to be capable of balancing employment and the care of children. Although very slight differences exist among the Scandinavian countries, they all provide mothers and fathers with 'the choice of either publicly prolonged familised care or defamilised care services. Parenthood targets working and domesticated mothers (Leira in Ellingsater & Leira, 2006).

## **Parental leave**

Parental leave in the Scandinavia is quite a long period covered by the state for both father and mother. The duration of leave for the mother ranges from six months to ten months and even up to eighteen months in Sweden (Eydal, B. 2008). Paternity leave is a shorter period and it is three weeks in Finland and Iceland and two weeks in other Scandinavian countries. At the moment, the paternity leave in Denmark has been abolished. Nevertheless the father can share the parental leave with the mother according to their mutual agreement. The time period of such an agreement varies among the countries (Lammi-Taskula in Ellingsater & Leira 2006). In principle only one parent at a time stays home on parental leave taking care of the child while the other goes to work or study. However it is normal for the other parent to take regular annual leave and stay at home with the other during this period. Paternity benefits in these countries also depend on the length of time the father has been in full employment. Lammi-Taskula in Ellingsater & Leira, also mention that 'in Finland, a father living together with the mother of the child is

entitled to parental leave and benefit regardless of the mother's position in the labour market...in Sweden even if the father does not leave with the mother he is also entitled to parental benefit if their child lives in Sweden and the parents have shared custody'. These forms of leave are part of the Social Insurance scheme; therefore earnings related compensation is paid during the leave period.

### **Gender roles in child care**

Gender equality in the Scandinavia is a given and manifests in almost all aspects of socio-political and economic life in this part of Europe. Family policies are gender sensitive and parenthood policies are instituted such that gender relations are significant at least on the symbolic level. To what extent this happens in actual division of labour between mothers and fathers is still a question? Child rights including the rights to provision and care of both parents have been instituted. Scandinavian policies have undergone changes over the years that are intended to ensure fathers opportunities to take care of their families (Eydal, B. 2008). Although the mother is 'the primary parent...the father can be a visiting care assistant' (Lammi-Taskula in Ellingsater & Leira, 2006). Transferring part of parental leave is negotiated by the parents with no explicit suggestion to change the status-quo of gender relations, that is, the mother's primacy in childcare. Norway, Sweden and Iceland, have a more clear-cut orientation in promoting father care and share roles between women and men in infant care. Lammi-Taskula states that 'Finland and Denmark on the other hand are more vague in striving for gender equality in promoting father care' (Lammi-Taskula in Ellingsater & Leira, 2006). Fathers take only a small portion of the whole parental leave period in all Scandinavian countries. Nonetheless, these gender balanced duties seem to be conditioned by socio-economic factors in these countries rather by the policy claims. There is a variation within the countries themselves and within the nature of employees; white-collar, blue-collar, minority, well-educated parents all have different views about equal sharing of duties over childcare. Lammi-Taskula maintains that "for large numbers of Nordic parents, unverified assumptions...about economic consequences of equal sharing of parental leave as well as cultural conceptions of gender and parenthood, especially motherhood, hamper negotiations both in the family and in the work place. Unreflected, unequal gender relations are naturalised and remain unchallenged" (Lammi-Taskalu in Ellingsater 2006).

These observations raise questions of the nature and limits to gender equality that the Scandinavian countries can declare. This idea is even more illustrated in the Norwegian context where parental leave arrangements are usually classified as policies enhancing gender equality. However, parental leave can be ambiguous with regard to gender equality objective, both regarding policy rationale and policy impact (Ellingsater in Ellingsater & Leira 2006). National variations of parental leave arrangements actually reflect different purposes, and generally are geared towards encouraging women to stay at home and promoting gender equality by supporting mother's employment rather than shared responsibility in childcare. This idea is further substantiated by Boje (2006) who posits that even if mothers in all Scandinavian countries have taken up employment in large numbers, the traditionally gendered pattern of responsibility for child care remains in the large majority of families. In his article, he observes that although Denmark and Sweden seem to have the most equal division of caring responsibilities, even 'the strong political commitment to equality has not fundamentally changed the gendered division of childcare. 'progressive and women friendly policies concerning work and family might modify the prevailing gender order but more profound changes can only be accomplished through comprehensive changes in norms and values concerning gender roles ( Boje in Ellingsater & Leira, 2006). Hence, looking at the above analysis it can be said that the question of gender roles in childcare in the Scandinavia is almost still a myth and in as much as the state would want to achieve gender equality in almost all spheres of life, the issue of gender equality in childcare is still a challenge to these states. Eydal (2008) remarks that if this myth could become a reality pretty soon, the new generation of children born in the family where both parents take care of children, will be the ones to break the vicious cycle of gender inequality.

## **References**

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## **BREASTFEEDING FATHERS' SUPPORT IN FINLAND**

Breastfeeding in general and exclusive breastfeeding in particular is a natural practice in Finland for several years. Its importance is emphasized by health care staff, and families benefit a lot from this practice because of the welfare services provided by the state with gender sensitive approaches to child care. A look at two generations of parents from Finland reveals that like in most western countries, breastfeeding was not an issue or 'fashionable' some 25 years ago. I interviewed parents from two different generations to learn about how breastfeeding evolved and how fathers supported the mothers who breastfed.

*Liisa is 53 years old and breastfed her two grown up children.*

“Breastfeeding was not common and was not strongly supported by the health personnel 25 years ago. I breastfed my children because I felt that it was natural and I did that exclusively for six months before introducing liquids and soft food. I had so much milk that I extracted and donated to the hospital because milk banks in Finland generated income for women who gave some of their breastmilk to the hospitals to assist working mothers or others who had problems breastfeeding their babies. Hospitals made it easier by having health personnel go around from home to home to collect the milk for their first food banks. During the periods I breastfed our babies, my husband was totally supportive and helped me with house chores and carrying the baby sometimes so I can rest. He learnt how to change the diapers at night and assist me too with this task. Indeed, it was just a total agreement between my partner and me to have the children breastfed and to do it well”.

*Sirpa is 53 years old and nurtured her two grown up children now aged 33 and 25.*

Sirpa said, in her case, breastfeeding was very much a mothers business and her personal decision because it was not emphasized in their days like today. In her words, “To me, it was a burden because I did not get any support from my husband.” It was a religious and legalistic burden on women because the state and the church did not provide any kind of support to women in those days. The state and religious organisation considered that it was the right of the child, that a mother should breastfeed her baby. Many did not see how men could be associated to the task of breastfeed.

*Annette is 23 years old and a first-time mother. Her baby is two years old already*

“I did exclusive breastfeeding for four months before introducing water and supplementary food. However, I continued mixed feeding until our son was 11 months old. My husband was extremely supportive. He did the house chores and this permitted me to have enough time to breastfeed. My partner took the baby and padded him after breastfeeding and this help as father attachment to the baby. He gave me a lot of psychological support and I think most of my friends get that kind of support from their partners too”.

*Matti is a 24 year-old first-time father and husband of is Annette*

Matti during the conversation with Yvonne gave the reason why he supported Annette. “I supported Annette because I thought that our baby will benefit a lot from breastfeeding. I would give her pillows during the process for her to seat comfortably. I helped to make the place comfortable for her so that both mother and baby were in comfortable positions during the process. I used to get food for her because I knew that she needed to eat well to be able to breastfeed well too. I generally took care of her and made life easy for her. I tried to give her all the psychological support because it was tough for both of us. I did the house chores so she could have much time to rest”. This kept us closer in the interest of our baby boy.

*Jessica is 25 year- old mother of two children aged 7 and 6 years already.*

Jessica got her babies when “Breastfeeding was already quite common. “My husband was very helpful and did the house tasks, changing the babies’ diapers at night. Unfortunately, I had some allergies, so I could not practise exclusive breastfeeding completely. For this reason, my husband and I decided to introduce other foods quite early enough for the baby not to loss weight and my partner helped in preparing food for the babies too”.

*Tiina is 31 years old has 3 children who are aged 7, 6 and 3.*

The first two babies of Tiina were born with a difference of just one year. In Tiina’s words, “I got very good support from my husband although he didn’t stay up at night to help change the diapers. I used to have much milk and donated some to the hospital. My partner helped me in doing the extraction and because of his total support, we were able to breastfeed all three children exclusively for 1 year each before continuing with mixed feeding. Our first baby was

breastfed for 14 months, the second for 20 months and the third for 29 months and this was thanks to the support I got from their father”.



*From left to right: Tiina, Yvonne, Jessica, Sirpa & Joyce*



*From left to right: Tiina, Yvonne, Jessica & Sirpa*

Interviews conducted by Yvonne Bekeny on Sunday the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 2009