
Parental Leave Policies and Gender Equality: A Survey of the Literature^{*}

Lídia Farré

*Universitat de Barcelona, Faculty of Economics and Business (GiM-IREA), Avda. Diagonal, 690,
08034 Barcelona, Spain. E-mail: lidia.farre@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Important gender differences still persist in many labor market outcomes. This paper argues that the design of parental leave policies can play an important role in shaping these differences. A summary of the literature reveals that extended maternity leave mandates increase female labor force participation at the cost of lower wages, less presence of women in high-profile occupations and a more traditional division of tasks within the family. Periods of leave exclusively reserved for fathers are proposed as a policy instrument to increase men's participation in family tasks and facilitate women's progress in the professional career. The paper concludes with a revision of these policies and their implications for gender equality.

Keywords: Parental Leave, Father or Daddy Quota, Gender Inequality, Childcare; Labor Supply, Gender Role Attitudes.

Permisos de Paternidad e igualdad de género: Una revisión de la literatura

RESUMEN

En el mercado de trabajo todavía existen importantes diferencias entre hombres y mujeres. Este trabajo argumenta que los permisos de paternidad pueden tener un papel importante sobre esas diferencias. La revisión de la literatura sugiere que una extensión de la baja de maternidad tiende a aumentar la participación femenina en el mercado de trabajo a cambio de salarios más bajos, menor presencia de mujeres en ocupaciones de alta cualificación y una división más tradicional de las tareas dentro del hogar. Por su parte, los permisos de paternidad reservados exclusivamente a los hombres se proponen como un instrumento útil para impulsar su participación en las tareas familiares y facilitar el progreso de las mujeres en la carrera profesional. El artículo concluye con una revisión de estos permisos y sus efectos sobre la desigualdad de género.

Palabras Clave: Permiso de maternidad y paternidad, desigualdad de género, cuidado de los niños, oferta de trabajo, cultura de género.

Clasificación JEL: J16, D13, J13

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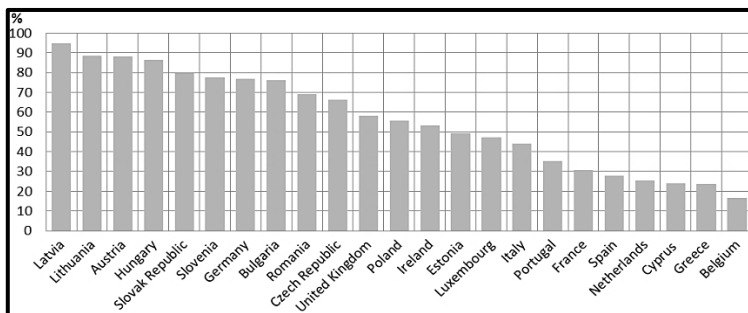
1. INTRODUCTION

Parental leave policies were initially designed to protect a mother and her child's health at an early age as well as to balance family and market work. The main economic feature of these policies is the right to return to a previous employment position within a certain period (job-protected leave).¹ However, the labor market effects of family policies are complex and not always well understood.

This paper revises the economic consequences of parental leave policies and highlights the importance of periods of leave exclusively reserved for fathers to reduce gender differences within the family and the workplace. It also summarizes the experience of countries that have introduced these policies. The evidence suggests that non-transferable mandates entitled to fathers are a powerful policy instrument to increase their participation in parental leave. There is, however, more controversy regarding the long-term effects on gender imbalances.

In most OECD countries both parents are eligible to take time off work after a child is born, but the large majority of leave-takers are women (OECD 2015). Figure 1 shows the percentage of employed mothers with a child under age 1 on maternity or parental leave for a sample of European countries.² The percentage ranges from around 80 to 90% in countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Austria and Hungary to less than 30% in Spain, the Netherlands, Greece and Belgium.

Figure 1
Use of leave by employed mothers



Note: Proportion of employed mothers with a child under age 1 on maternity or parental leave, 2013.

Source: OECD (2015) Family Database.

¹ The period of job-absence may be paid, unpaid or partially paid depending on each country specific policy.

² Maternity leave is the period of job absence exclusively reserved for the mother, while the parental leave period can be shared by the two parents.

While parental leave policies have been shown to have a positive effect on female job continuity, there is also the concern that they foster gender inequality in other labor market outcomes (Ruhm 1998). For example, Sweden has a very generous system of family benefits. Parents are allowed a total of 480 days of partially paid leave that can be taken any time up until the child turns 8 years old.³ In this country, the gender gap in employment is only 3.9% and there is little if any gender wage gap for low and intermediate skill groups (less than 10%).⁴ However, a considerable gender difference exists among the salaries of high-skilled workers (Albrecht *et al.*, 2014).

On the contrary, in the US mothers are entitled to only 12 weeks of unpaid leave.⁵ Blau and Kahn (2013) argue that this scheme can partly explain the decline in US women's relative position in the labor force participation internationally (see Table 1).⁶ However, these authors also suggest that the shorter leave may be responsible for the smaller occupational segregation by gender and the larger presence of women in top-positions in the US relative to most other OECD countries (Blau, Ferber and Winkler 2010).⁷

Table 1
Male and female labor market indicators

	1990		2010	
	US	Non-US	US	Non-US
Male labor force participation	93.4	94	89.3	92.5
Female labor force participation	74	67.1	75.2	79.5
Male part-time work incidence	2.8	3.1	3.9	5.1
Female part-time work incidence	14.7	25.8	13.1	26

Note: Non-US countries include: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Source: Table 1 and 2 in Blau and Kahn (2013).

Differences in labor market outcomes between men and women are large and persistent in many countries. In 2012 the average gender wage gap in the OECD was 15.2% and the difference in full-time employment was 22.4%. These gaps vary across countries and most of them are driven by the behavior of

³ Of the total paid leave, 390 days, 60 days are reserved for each parent.

⁴ OECD (2015) Family Dataset.

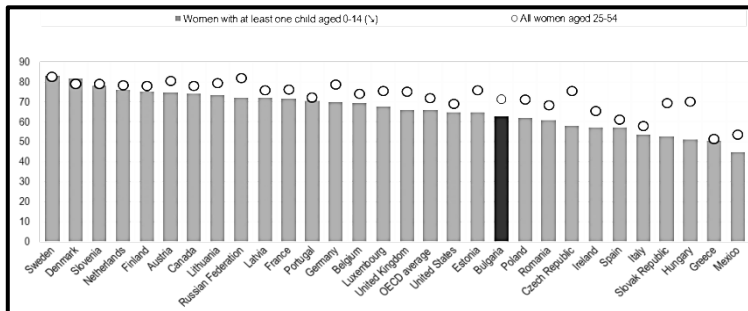
⁵ The US mandate dates to the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993.

⁶ In 1990, the US women's labor force participation rate of 74 percent was the 6th highest among the countries considered in Table 1. As of 2010, US women ranked 17th of 22.

⁷ In 2013, the share of females in managerial occupations was 43.4% in the US while it was 30.8% in the non-US countries in Table 1. Source: OECD 2015 Family Database.

women around childbirth (Low and Sánchez-Marcos 2015). Figure 2 shows the employment rate of women with at least one child and that of all women aged 25-54. The differences are substantial, in particular among the group with school age children.

Figure 2
Maternal employment rates



Note: Employment rates for women (15-64 years old) with at least one child aged 0-14 and for all women aged 25-54. Data for the year 2013.

Source: OECD (2015) Family Database.

The economic design of parental leave policies also differs across countries. The duration of paid maternal leave ranges from more than 1 year in most Scandinavian countries to less than 4 months in countries such as Spain, Switzerland or Turkey (see Figure 3). Despite the complex effects of family policies on female labor supply and gender equality, the majority of OECD countries have increased the length of paid leave available to mothers. On average, the duration has increased from 17 weeks in 1970 to 39 weeks in 1990 and 52 weeks in 2014 (see Figure 3).

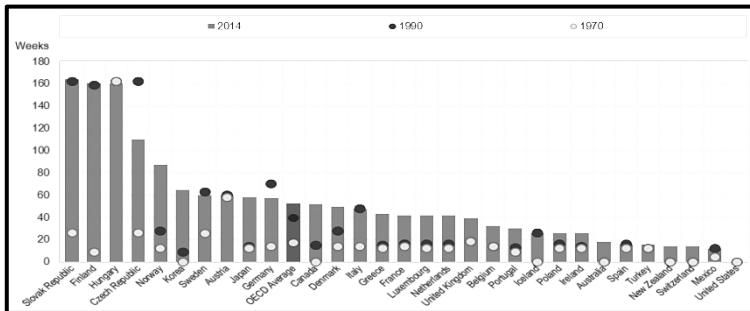
Since 2010 the majority of European countries have implemented parental leave entitlements for fathers which are not transferable to mothers (see Figure 4). However there is substantial variation in their design and duration. For instance, in Norway and Iceland fathers have right to 12 weeks of paid leave while in Spain to only 2.⁸

Paternity leave policies are designed to increase fathers' involvement in childcare activities and reduce gender specialization within the family (Becker 1965 and 1985). Time off work exclusively reserved for fathers to care for children may facilitate women's re-entry into paid employment. Moreover, if men are equally likely than women to take parental leave statistical discrimination against women should also decrease or disappear (Lazear and

⁸ For more details on the design of parental, maternity and paternity leave policies across OECD countries visit "www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2_5_Trends_in_leave_entitlements_around_childbirth_Annex.pdf"

Rosen 1990). Thus the allocation of a portion of the leave to fathers that cannot be transferred to mothers seems a promising instrument to reduce gender imbalances in the labor market and at home.

Figure 3
Length of paid leave available to mothers, 1970, 1990 and 2014

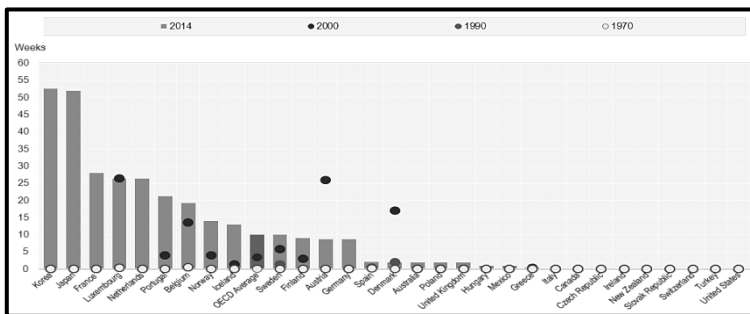


Note: Information refers to weeks of paid maternity leave and any weeks of paid parental leave and paid home care leave that are available to mothers.

Source: OECD (2015) Family Database.

The next section summarizes the economic content of parental leave policies and their implications for labor supply and household behavior. Section 3 provides a survey of the literature that empirically investigates the short and long-term effects of parental leave periods exclusively reserved for fathers. The paper concludes with some final remarks in Section 4.

Figure 4
Length of paid leave reserved for fathers, 1970, 1990 and 2014



Note: Information refers to entitlements to paternity leave, "father quotas" or periods of parental leave that can be used only by the father and cannot be transferred to the mother, and any weeks of sharable leave that must be taken by the father in order for the family to qualify for "bonus" weeks of parental leave.

Source: OECD (2015) Family Database.

2. THE ECONOMICS OF PARENTAL LEAVE POLICIES

Parental leave regulations are an important element of family policies in most OECD countries. Leave policies not only promote the health of new mothers and their children, but also assist parents in managing employment obligations in the presence of young children. Maternity leave mandates have traditionally been the core of family policies, but over the last 20 years paternity provisions have also become more common. This section investigates the economic implications of these policies.

Maternity leave provisions are periods of job absence (paid or unpaid) exclusively entitled to mothers. More precisely, they allow mothers to leave their workplace for a limited amount of time around childbirth and give them the right to return to their previous employer afterward. By 2013 the vast majority of countries had adopted statutory provisions for paid maternity leave (ILO 2014). However, there is substantial cross-country variation in the design of the mandates. For example, since the introduction of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in 1993 most women in the US can benefit from 12 weeks of (unpaid) leave. In contrast, in Germany women are eligible for 3 years of (partially) paid leave. During the last decades, most developed economies have increased the duration of maternity leave (see Figure 3). Despite this gradual shift towards extended maternity coverage, the implications on female labor market outcomes are not fully understood.

An extension of the job protected period should delay the return-to-work decision by mothers and have a negative impact on female labor force participation in the period immediately surrounding childbirth (Klerman and Leibowitz 1997). This short-run effect is mechanical and intended by the design of the policy. Most of the empirical evidence confirms that an extended paid leave encourages mothers to stay off work longer and lowers employment and labor earnings immediately after birth (Rossin-Slater *et al.*, 2013, Lalive and Zweimüller 2009, Baker and Milligan 2008 and Berger and Waldfogel 2004).

In the long-run two opposing mechanisms lead to a theoretically ambiguous effect on female labor force participation. On the one hand, a longer leave may encourage mothers' job continuity (Baker and Milligan 2008). That is, when job-protected periods are too short some mothers may prefer to stay home with their children and lose the employment guarantee. However, the utility to stay home declines with the child's age, and mothers may be willing to return to their pre-birth job as the child ages. Therefore, a sufficiently large maternity leave period could encourage women's continuity in the job. On the other hand, prolonged job absences make women less valuable in the labor market due to human capital depreciation (Becker 1985, Ruhm 1998). As a result, women

could delay even further their re-employment decision.⁹ It may also be that as mothers spend more time with their children they enjoy it more and want to spend even more time with them (Schönberg and Ludsteck 2014). Thus the overall effect of extended maternity leave periods on mother's labor supply is ambiguous.

These two opposing mechanisms also affect mothers' long-term earnings profiles. First, extended job protected rights induce women to postpone their return to work. Thus women have less time to accumulate labor experience and may lose more skills while at home (i.e. human capital depreciation). Second, more generous leave policies may allow mothers to benefit from pre-birth job experiences, maintain good job matches, and progress in their career within the firm (i.e. retain firm- or occupation specific human capital (Waldfogel, 1998)). Therefore, the overall effects on long-term earnings are theoretically ambiguous.

The existing evidence is mixed and probably affected by the idiosyncrasies of each policy, country and most responsive groups in the population (Lalive *et al.*, 2014). For example, in Austria prolonged leave reforms increased the proportion of women who never returned to work after childbirth, but did not seem to hurt mothers' employment and earnings over an extended horizon (Lalive and Zweimüller 2009; Lalive *et al.*, 2014). Similar results are reported by Schönberg and Ludsteck (2014) for five major expansions in maternity leave coverage in Germany.

For the US, the impact of the 1993 US Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which guaranteed a job protected unpaid maternity leave of 12 weeks had no effect on the employment and wages of mothers (Baum 2003). In contrast, there is some suggestive evidence that the introduction of a paid leave in California in 2004 increased the number of hours worked and wages of mothers of 1 to 3 year-old children.

For Europe, Ruhn (1998) investigated the economic consequences of paid parental leave over the 1969 through 1993 period and reported that paid protected job-absences were associated to increases in women's employment, but that extended durations reduced women's wages in the long-term. An interesting result for Germany is that the negative effect on women's post-birth wages seems to be driven by the negative selection of those who return to work after giving birth (Ejmaes and Kunze, 2013).¹⁰

The detrimental effects on the employment and earnings opportunities of mothers may also be demand driven. Extended parental leave periods may lead

⁹ The decision to return to work will be a function of women's reservation wages.

¹⁰ Mothers who suffer from relatively large wage losses in connection with birth are those relatively more likely to return to full-time employment after birth.

employers to engage in statistical discrimination against women if investing in men is considered safer due to their lower job-absence probability. This form of discrimination may be particularly important in high-level positions that require strong commitment and flexibility.¹¹ A generous parental leave system encourages women to take long periods of leave and to be less flexible with respect to hours once they return to work. Thus employers will place relatively few women in high-level positions. Also, if there is negative selection among women who return to work relatively shortly after birth, firms may have excessively low expectations about the mean productivity of all mothers (Ejrnaes and Kunze 2013).

To promote gender equality both in the labor market and within the family several countries have introduced policy reforms that encourage men's take-up and share of parental leave. A key element of these policies is the allocation of a portion of the paid leave to the father that is non-transferable to the mother, so that fathers who do not use their "quota" lose it (i.e. the "father or daddy" quota).

The entitlement of individual rights to parental leave seems to have a larger impact on fathers' take-up rate than policies that allow both parents to choose. For example, Sweden was the first country to grant fathers and mothers equal access to paid leave in 1974. However, few men took parental leave and a non-transferable one-month paid father's quota was introduced in 1995.¹² The reform increased the take-up rate by fathers from 9% to 47% (Ekberg *et al.*, 2013). Another example is Iceland that has one of the longest periods of paid paternity leave (3 months). In 2009, 96 percent of fathers took leave for every 100 mothers, using an average of 99 days compared to 178 for women (ILO 2014).

More equitable parental leave policies should tend to equalize the probability of both parents to take time off to care for children. In this context, investments in training provide the same returns for men than women. Thus employers' hiring or promotion decisions should not be gender biased (Lazear and Rosen 1990 and Phelps 1972).

Periods of leave exclusively reserved for fathers should also give them the opportunity to share more time with their children and develop more emotional linkages and child-rearing skills. This is expected to change the allocation of time within the family, leading to a lower specialization of women in domestic and child-related activities (Becker 1965, 1985 and Rosen 1983). A less gender-specific home production model should also affect employers' views regarding their female employees.

¹¹ Extended absence and lack of flexibility are particularly costly for employers when employees hold top jobs (Goldin 2014).

¹² The quota was extended to 2 months in 2002.

In addition, the legal entitlement to fathers of a portion of the parental leave reduces household bargaining regarding work career interruptions. With shared leaves parents have to reach an agreement regarding who temporarily drops out from the labor force to assume the new family responsibilities. Under these leave schemes women tend to be the main takers. Instead, the "father or daddy" quota establishes the number of weeks fathers can be on leave, potentially reducing within household disputes and increasing marital stability (Steingrimsdottir and Vardardottir 2014).

Finally, periods entitled exclusively to fathers may potentially affect their labor market outcomes. Without individual entitlements, job-absences for childcare can be seen as a signal of low commitment with the professional career. There is evidence that when the leave is shared according to family preferences, men who take it are penalized after returning to work (Waldfogel 1998). In contrast, the quota for fathers introduces stigma against those who do not use the opportunity to spend more time with their children (Dahl *et al.*, 2014).

The next section summarizes the experiences of countries that have recently introduced paternity leave mandates and their implications for gender equality in several labor and non-labor market outcomes.

3. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTS OF PATERNITY LEAVE

In order to promote gender equality in the labor market and a more balanced share of family tasks between working parents, the European Union Parental Leave Directive 2010/18 recommended the introduction of non-transferable parental leave periods entitled exclusively to fathers. This section summarizes the experience of countries that have implemented these measures. The analysis is conditioned by the availability of studies and data.

Norway was one of the first countries to introduced parental leave rights entitled to fathers. In 1993 the period of paid leave was extended to 42 weeks, 4 of which reserved to the father (Rege and Solli 2013). Sweden has one of the most generous parental leave schemes (Ekberg *et al.*, 2013). In 1995 the "daddy month" was instituted, reserving 1 month out of 12 for the father. A second daddy month was added in 2002.

Since 2001 Iceland gives men the largest non-transferable share of parental leave in the world. In this country, 3 months are reserved to the father, 3 months to the mother, and 3 additional months can be freely allocated between parents (Steingrimsdottir and Vardardottir 2015). In 2006 the Canadian region of Quebec established a "daddy quota" whereby 5 weeks of leave out of 55 were set aside for the father and could not be transferred to the mother (Patnaik 2015). The most recent reform took place in Germany, where 2 out of 14

months of paid leave are reserved for the father since 2007 (Kluve and Tamm 2013).

1) Fathers' participation in parental leave

The introduction of leave options that are specifically designed for fathers should have a first order effect on men's take-up rate of parental leave. This is supported by the evidence in all studied cases.

In Germany, the introduction of the 2 months "daddy quota" led to an increase in fathers' parental leave participation from 4% to 16% (Kluve and Tamm 2013). For Norway, Rege and Solli (2013) find that the 4 weeks of paternity leave increased participation from less than 3% prior to 1993 to about 60% in 1995. In Iceland the participation of men in parental leave is high and has grown much faster than in other countries. Between 2001 and 2005 the share of fathers that applied for the quota increased from 50% to almost 90%. In Sweden, Ekberg *et al.* (2013) also find that the "daddy month" increased leave days for fathers by 15 (around 50%). Finally, in Canada the reform led to an increase in men's claim rates of 53% and increased their leave duration by 3 weeks.

There is evidence that participation in paternity leave exhibits important peer effects. Dahl *et al.* (2014) using detailed administrative data for Norway find that fathers are more likely to take parental leave if their brothers or coworkers have done so. The authors provide convincing evidence that the most likely mechanism driving this result is the lack of information about employers' reaction to job absences for childcare.

The previous evidence clearly indicates that parental leave entitlements reserved to fathers and non-transferable to mothers (i.e. "use-it or lose-it" quota) are an effective measure to increase men's participation in parental leave. The evidence also suggests that few fathers decide to take more leave than the minimum amount of time provided by the regulation.

2) Gender division of housework and marital stability

A sufficient large period of paid leave exclusively reserved to fathers could affect the distribution of time within the family, leading to less specialization of women in household and child-care related activities.

In a cross-country study Boll *et al.* (2014) using the Multinational Time Use Study compare changes in time devoted to childcare by fathers in a group of countries that introduced individual entitlements to parental leave between 1971 and 2005.¹³ Their results suggest that one extra exclusive parental leave week

¹³ The countries in the analysis are Canada, Finland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

for fathers increased a highly educated father's time with his child by roughly 7 minutes per week. No effects are identified for fathers with lower levels of education.

The country case studies allow a more detailed analysis of the short and long-term effects of the periods of leave reserved for fathers. In Sweden, while the reform had important short-term effects on fathers' take-up rates, no behavioral effects are identified within the family. In particular, fathers did not take longer shares of parental leave to care for sick children, which is the measure of long-term involvement in housework in Ekberg *et al.* (2013). Similarly for Germany, Schober (2014) and Kluve and Tamm (2013) find that the two "daddy month" quota increased the take-up rate but that fathers were not more involved in childcare beyond the period of leave after birth.

In contrast, Patnaik (2015) in Canada reports large and persistent effects on gender dynamics within the household 1 to 3 years after the introduction of the reform. Both parents increased their participation in non-market activities, although fathers increased their time by more than mothers. Specifically, fathers spent 37 minutes longer in non-market work per day while mothers reduced their time in housework by 18 minutes and increased their time in childcare by 48, leading to an increase of 30 minutes in total non-market work. Since fathers increased non-market work more than mother do, the reform should have led to a reduction of female specialization in home production.

In Norway, there is also evidence that the "daddy quota" led to a more equal division of the task of washing clothes, the most unequally shared task in the house. Also individuals affected by the reform reported much fewer conflicts regarding the division of household chores. More marital satiability was also documented in Iceland. After the reform spouses entitled to paternity leave were less likely to divorces during the first years of child's life, the period when most divorces take place (Steingrimsdottir and Vardardottir 2014).

This evidence indicates that the quota incentivizes fathers' involvement in housework, though not necessarily in childcare activities. The results also suggest that while fathers spend more time with their children when they are on leave, it is not the case in all countries that the greater involvement continues beyond the take-up period after birth.

3) *Fathers' labor market outcomes*

The introduction of a parental leave quota exclusively reserved for fathers may have a detrimental effect on their work career if they shift time and effort from market to home production (Becker 1985). The previous evidence indicates that while the take-up rate of fathers increases in response to the reforms, their involvement in long-term care activities is not yet confirmed.

Most of the studies are not able to identify any effect of the "daddy quota" on the labor market earnings or employment rate of men. The reform does not seem to have any effect on the labor market prospects of fathers in Germany (Kluve and Tamm 2013) or Sweden (Ekberg *et al.*, 2013). In Iceland, Steingrimsdottir and Vardardottir (2015) also find no effect on male and female earnings separately, but they do report a negative effect of the quota on the earnings gap between couples where male spouse enjoyed an earnings advantage over their partner.

Small negative effects are reported for the 1993 Norwegian reform (Rege and Solli 2013). In this country, the 4 weeks of paternity leave during the child's first year represented a decrease in fathers' future earnings of about 1.4% to 2.2%. For Canada there is also suggestive evidence that after the reform exposed fathers spent less time in paid work and experienced a not insignificant reduction in personal income (Patnaik 2015).

4) Mothers' labor market outcomes

The introduction of the non-transferable leave for fathers should provide more opportunities for the professional development of mothers. However, few studies have been able to identify important effects on the labor market outcomes of women.

For countries such as Sweden and Germany, the previous evidence does not suggest important changes in household behavior in response to the father's quota. Thus it is not surprising that the reported effects on women's employment rate or labor market earnings are, if any, small and disappear in the long-term (Ekberg *et al.*, 2013 and Kluve and Tamm 2013). In contrast, in Canada the introduction of the quota substantially affected household dynamics. Patnaik (2015) estimates that after the reform mothers worked 1.35 more hours per week and their annual income increased by about 5,819 CAD - an increase of over 25% of the baseline income.

In Norway, the evidence also suggests changes in household behavior driven mainly by a greater involvement of fathers in non-market activities. In this country, mothers responded to the reform by increasing their time devoted to non-market work (Cools *et al.*, 2015). This finding points towards a possible complementarity between fathers and mothers' time at home.

5) Policy design and cultural heritage

The previous evidence reveals differences across countries in the response to the introduction of periods of parental leave reserved for fathers. This may be partly explained by the design of each national policy. For instance, in Canada the "daddy" quota represented 5 additional weeks to the shared parental leave, which was previously not exhausted by most mothers (Patnaik 2015). On the

contrary, in Sweden the 4 weeks reserved for the father were subtracted from the previously shared parental leave period. In this country the introduction of the quota altered a binding constraint as most mothers exhausted the parental leave prior to the reform. Therefore, it is not clear whether fathers in Sweden responded to their individual right to take leave or whether families were simply trying to maximize leave, which made it necessary for fathers to participate.

In addition, the division of tasks within the household has been traditionally guided by a specialization pattern in which men are the main breadwinners and women the providers of care. A less gender-specialized home production model also requires a change in attitudes or beliefs regarding the role of men and women in the society. Previous evidence suggests that culture and beliefs evolve slowly over time (Farré and Vella 2013 or Alesina *et al.*, 2013), thus a longer time horizon may be necessary to observe a more drastic change in household behavior in response to the "father" quota.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper argues that the current design of parental leave policies may perpetuate gender imbalances within the family and at the workplace. It documents that extended maternity leave mandates, while increasing female employment, may have a detrimental effect on women's post-birth earnings and career opportunities.

Periods of parental leave exclusively reserved for fathers and non-transferable to mothers are presented as a useful policy instrument to alter the gender-specialization home production model and increase women's opportunities in the workplace. The existing evidence indicates that a quota reserved for fathers provides strong short-term incentives to increase their participation in parental leave. However their effectiveness to increase fathers' long-term involvement in childcare and household work has not yet been confirmed in most countries.

The large cultural component that governs the division of market and non-market activities within the family may delay the effects of the reforms. In addition, family policies have to be carefully designed. For instance, there is evidence that the "father" quota has larger effects if the reserved weeks are added to the existing shared parental leave instead of subtracted from it. As more countries introduce changes in their family policies there will be more scope to further evaluate the magnitude of their effects on household behavior and gender equality.

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