

# Towards gender balanced parental leave

## Australian and international trends

Insight paper



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# Summary

Parental leave policies are a major feature of family policies in OECD countries. However, the share of men using parental leave remains low.

Parental leave policies are designed to support and protect working parents around the time of childbirth or adoption of a child and when children are young. The availability of paid parental leave for each parent fosters a more equal division of unpaid care and paid work, improving the family work-life balance.

Australia's combined approach to parental leave provides some flexibility about when leave can be used. If available, fathers/partners tend to take employer paid parental leave, rather than government funded parental leave.

## Key findings

- Paid parental leave encourages and supports women and men in their role as both employees and carers.
- Parental leave may help breaking down gender stereotypes around unpaid and paid work if taken by women and men.
- Across OECD countries, paid parental leave entitlements vary in length, generosity and flexibility.
- Flexible and generous parental leave policies are encouraging men utilising the entitlement.
- A supportive workplace culture is key to increase fathers/carers uptake of parental leave.

## Towards a gender balanced paid parental leave

Parental leave policies in OECD countries are expanding, providing entitlements specifically designed to support both working parents. These policy amendments are largely a consequence of changing norms and practices of the traditional gender division between the private and the public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional norms of the male breadwinner model, in which men earn a sufficient wage to support a family and women engage in unpaid labour and care have long underpinned state policies towards family support and childcare.<sup>2</sup> This means that family policies, including leave entitlements and job protection measures for mothers, rather than for fathers/partners, have been an essential part of OECD countries. For instance, Germany introduced maternity leave rights in 1883 and in 1919 the International Labour Office adopted the first Maternity Protection Conventions, which were subsequently ratified by 33 countries.<sup>3</sup>

Women's increasing workforce participation and the decline of the male breadwinner model it is likely that gender-specific specialisations around unpaid care and paid work are slowly disappearing.<sup>4</sup> To accommodate these changes it requires some changes in workplaces, including access to flexible working and parental leave.

The majority of OECD countries have extended leave entitlements around the birth and adoption of a child to support both parents/carers, recognising that fathers/partners taking leave is good for children and for women's labour market outcomes.

The shift from maternity to parental leave policies reflects changing societies and family structures.

All OECD countries, except the United States, have introduced some form of partner/father specific leave entitlement.<sup>5</sup> Sweden was the first country in 1974 to introduce paid parental leave specifically targeting fathers/partners. In 2013, the OECD recommended providing paid leave to working mothers and fathers to promote gender equality.<sup>6</sup> Parental leave entitlements continue to vary greatly across OECD countries, in terms of the length, the flexibility, and the level of payments.

The availability of parental leave policies encourages fathers/partners to take a greater share in the upbringing of children.

### **Maternity leave:**

Employment protected individual leave entitlement for mothers.

### **Father/partner/secondary carers leave:**

Employment-protected leave for the father/partner, such as paternity leave, individual entitlements to parental leave and any weeks of sharable parental leave that are reserved for use by the father/partner only.

### **Parental leave/primary carers leave:**

Entitlement for parents to care for young children (either together or one parent at a time). In some cases until the child reaches two or three years of age.

Source: OECD

## About parental leave

Parental leave is the protected leave of absence from employment to allow parents to care for a newborn child, a young child or a recently-adopted child.

### Paid and unpaid parental leave

Paid parental leave is used to describe the various types of paid leave available to employees around the birth or adoption of a child.

Unpaid leave is where an employer is required to hold an employee's job while the employee is on leave. Paid parental leave provides employees with an income while on leave.

Paid and unpaid leave benefits and entitlements are usually regulated by law. In many countries, parental leave is government-funded for specific maternity and paternity or parental leave periods.

Paid parental leave entitlements varies across countries and is often linked to the individual and their role in the family (i.e. each parent has their own entitlement). This means that in general only one parent claims paid parental leave at any one time.

Most OECD countries offer paid or unpaid secondary carer's leave for a short period directly after the birth or adoption of a child.<sup>7</sup>

The availability of paid parental leave links to social, demographic and economic benefits, such as positive health effects on mother and child, higher fertility rates, gender equality and increased women's workforce participation.<sup>8</sup>

### Paid parental leave and gender equality

Parental leave policies protect each parent's job for a period of time following the birth or adoption of a child. Paid parental leave policies that are available for each parent support shared responsibility for raising children. In 2014 a Swiss study showed that if parental leave policies are available to each parent, it enables a more equal division of work between women and men by fostering paternal involvement in the care for a child.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a 2015 study found that the Norwegian paid parental leave policy (46 weeks of parental leave at 100% of the salary and 10 weeks of leave reserved for the co-parent)<sup>10</sup> contributes to a shortening of women's career interruptions and a more equal division of paid and unpaid work among parents.<sup>11</sup> These studies show that the availability of paid parental leave for each parent fosters a more equal division of unpaid care and improves family work-life balance.

### Paid parental leave and female workforce participation

Increasing women's workforce participation is linked to a country's overall economic performance. In 2014, the Australian Government committed to a G20 target of reducing the workforce participation gap between women and men by 25% by 2025 to boost global GDP.<sup>12</sup> More recently some governments, such as Sweden, Norway and Germany, have introduced government-funded paid leave entitlements specifically for fathers to promote greater gender equality in paid and unpaid work.<sup>13</sup>

Research suggests that government-funded paid parental leave contributes to an increase in women's workforce participation.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the introduction of 12 months paid leave in Germany led to an increase in women's workforce participation once the child turned one year of age and an increase in the fertility rate.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Norway has increased women's workforce participation and the fertility rate by implementing policies that promote work-family life balance, such as paid parental leave, the right to work part-time and subsidised child-care.<sup>16</sup>

### Paid parental leave as a health and wellbeing policy

The health and wellbeing of new mothers and babies is one of the reasons governments and many employers choose to provide paid leave. It enables women to spend the first weeks of a child's life recovering from the birth and nurturing the baby. For this reason, the International Labour Organisation recommends no less than 14 weeks of maternity leave<sup>17</sup> and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends six months, or 26 weeks, of breastfeeding to achieve optimal health for the infant.

Paid adoption leave allows new parents and their adoptive child time to develop a relationship and adapt to a new environment.

## Paid parental leave and financial security

Paid parental leave has a positive impact on the financial position of women and families. WGEA data shows that women's full-time total remuneration earnings are on average 23.1% (\$26,853) less than men's earnings across all industries and occupations.<sup>18</sup> This gender pay gap affects most women in the workforce to some degree over the course of their working lives.

It is during the years when many women are balancing paid work with unpaid caring responsibilities in the home that the gender pay gap widens considerably.<sup>19</sup> Research by KPMG has shown that 21% of the national gender pay gap is attributable to the years out of the workforce.<sup>20</sup> During this time, the cumulative loss of earnings that women experience arguably becomes irreversible, regardless of their subsequent paid employment.

Economists have reported that raising children accounts for a 17% loss in lifetime wages for women.<sup>21</sup> In addition, many women move into 'mother-friendly' occupations and/or return to work part-time following parental leave. The ABS estimates that 82% of mothers returning to work after childbirth work in part-time roles.<sup>22</sup> The decisions to change jobs and work part-time following the addition of a new child often have a negative impact on women's financial situation and future career opportunities.

Gender balanced paid parental leave positively impacts on the financial security of women, relieving income pressure during the first months with a new child and supporting women's return to the workforce.

## Australia's paid parental leave

The introduction of the first government paid parental leave policy in 2011 was a significant breakthrough supporting working parents. Eligible working parents can receive the Australian government's paid parental leave and employers may also offer paid parental leave to eligible employees. This means that working parents may be eligible for the government scheme as well as the employer paid parental leave scheme.

### Australian Government Paid Parental Leave Scheme

Australia's first national Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme came into effect on 1 January 2011 and provides eligible working parents with 18 weeks of PPL at the rate of the national minimum wage, currently at \$672.70 per week. In addition, since 2012 fathers or partners are entitled to two weeks of paid leave at the minimum wage, on a 'use it or lose it' basis. This means a total of 20 weeks PPL is available if all entitlements are utilised by a family unit.

The 18 weeks payment is technically available to be shared or taken by either parent, depending on who is undertaking primary carer duties. The parental pay must be fully paid within 52 weeks from the date of birth (including stillbirth) or adoption of a child and the submission of the claim. In addition, the start date of leave must be within 34 weeks of the child's birth or adoption.<sup>23</sup>

The PPL scheme complements existing workplace entitlements, including the access to unpaid parental leave under the National Employment Standards for long-term employees. The government's paid scheme does not change any existing workplace leave entitlements. Parental leave is an additional employer-provided leave entitlement and can be taken before, after or at the same time as paid or unpaid parental leave, and other employer-provided paid leave such as annual or long service leave.<sup>24</sup>

The *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010* requires that employers administer the government's Parental Leave Pay in addition to any other obligation they have to their employees.<sup>25</sup>

The Paid Parental Leave scheme review conducted in 2013-14 by the Department of Social Services showed that 99.4% of the recipients in 2012-13 were women.<sup>26</sup> The utilisation data suggests that the 'parental leave' scheme is more attractive to mothers as primary carers, rather than fathers/partners.<sup>27</sup> It might also suggest that families are not aware of the government support.

Overall, the mandated PPL scheme is flexible in terms of usage, yet by national and international standards not very generous.

### Employer-funded paid parental leave

In Australia, most employers offer paid parental leave, such as primary carer's leave, secondary carer's leave or parental leave which replaces an employee's regular salary following the birth or adoption of a child. This paid parental leave is generally offered for a specified period of time and within a specific timeframe.

Employer-funded paid parental leave is not a legislative requirement for employers in Australia, but is often regulated through industrial agreements or organisational policies.

Research suggests that there is strong business case for paid parental leave, as a cost-effective means of retaining valued staff and as one initiative that may assist employees to return to work after parental leave.<sup>28</sup> The availability of paid parental leave links to an increase in job satisfaction as well as an increase in employee productivity and loyalty. Paid parental leave benefits organisations by:

- increasing the number of employees returning to work after parental leave
- reducing recruitment and training costs
- improving staff morale and productivity
- providing a cost-effective means of retaining skilled staff
- improving organisational efficiency through the benefits of long service, for example, institutional memory, industry knowledge, networks and contacts.<sup>29</sup>

### **Availability of employer-funded parental leave**

The length of paid parental leave by employers varies across industries and organisations. WGEA data shows that in 2015-16, the average length of paid primary carers' leave was 10 weeks across all industries.<sup>30</sup>

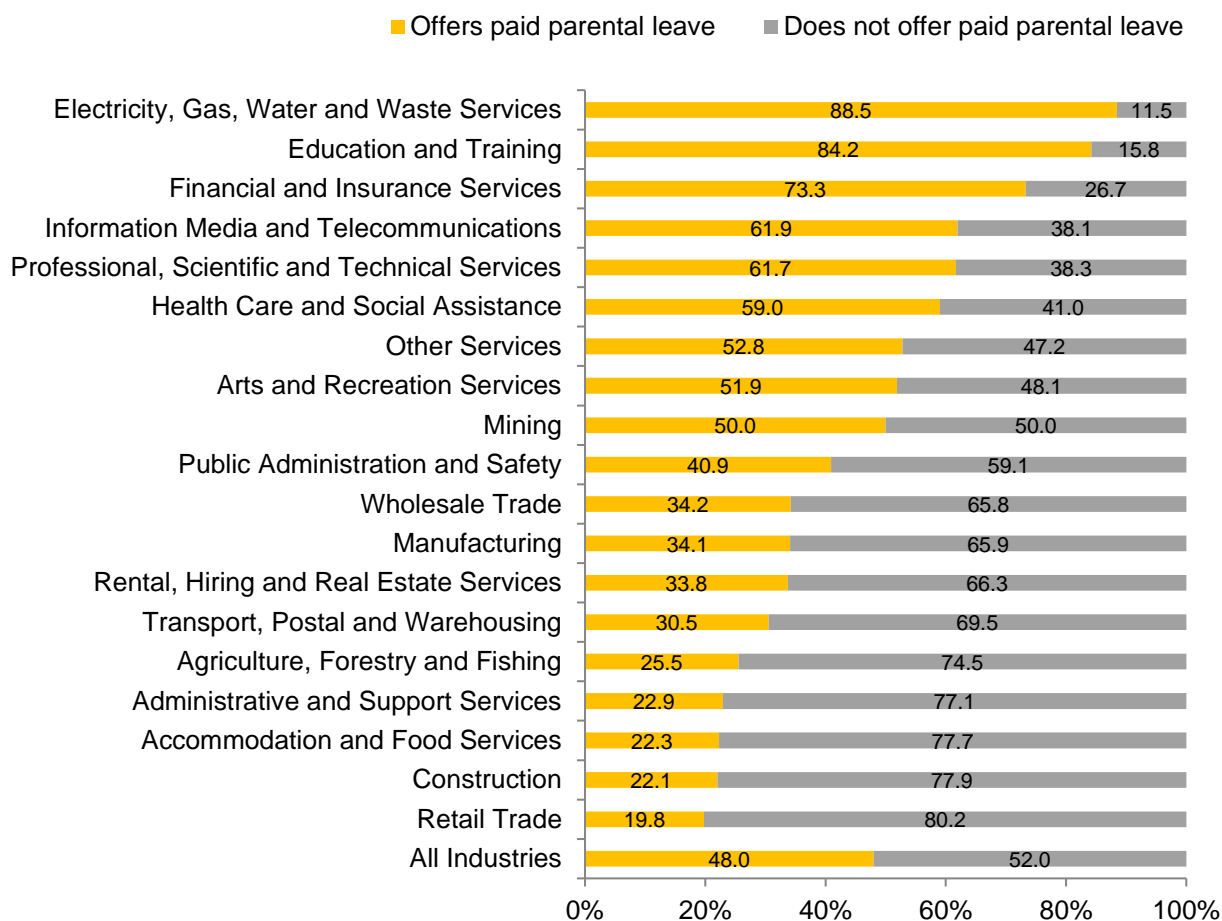
Employer-funded paid parental leave often covers full salary. Across all industries:

- 38.0% of employers pay the full salary in addition to the government scheme for a set period.
- 8.0% of organisations pay a lump sum payment and 4.3% pay the difference between the government scheme and the employee's full salary.

The WGEA data shows that the proportion of organisations that offer paid parental leave for primary carers was 48.0% in 2015-16.<sup>31</sup>

- Electricity, Gas Water and Waste Services, Education and Training and Financial and Insurance Services have the highest proportion of organisations offering PPL.
- Construction and Retail Trade have the lowest proportion of organisations offering PPL.

**Table 1: Proportion of organisations offering paid parental leave by industry 2015-16**



Source: WGEA (2016), Agency reporting data (2015-16 reporting period).

## **Utilisation of employer-funded paid parental leave**

Employer-funded paid parental leave in Australia is also largely utilised by women. However, the share of men utilising employer-funded parental leave is higher than the share of men utilising government-funded paid parental leave. This is likely to be a reflection of the generosity and flexibility of employer-funded parental leave schemes. WGEA [case studies](#) show that:

- employers have a key role in normalising fathers/partners utilisation of parental leave and flexible working to meet caring requirements, and
- a supportive workplace culture as well as leadership support is key to increase fathers/carers uptake of parental leave.

The data in table 6 shows that male managers are more likely to take paid primary carers leave than male non-managers.

**Table 2: Employer-funded primary carer's leave utilisation, 2015-16**

Manager		Non-manager	
Female	Male	Female	Male
91.6%	8.4%	95.6%	4.6%

Source: WGEA (2016), Agency reporting data (2015-16 reporting period)

## **International trends in parental leave entitlement and usage**

Paid parental leave is available to one parent/carer or to both parents in most OECD countries, usually paid as a government benefit, through the employer or directly through the government.

A comparison of parental leave policies is complex, due to different political systems and cultures with different leave entitlement systems, additional financial support schemes for parents, employer provided top-up payments and gaining access to the data on the take-up of these policies.<sup>32</sup>

### **International trends in paid parental leave entitlements**

The length, amount and recipients of paid parental leave entitlements differ across OECD countries. In some countries, it is a maternity/primary carer entitlement only and in other countries it is a sharable family entitlement with certain periods reserved for use by the mother/carer or the father/carer.

Parental payment rates tend to be lower in English-speaking OECD countries. The US is one of the only countries without government-mandated paid parental leave entitlements. Australia's full-rate equivalent weekly parental leave payment is one of the lowest in the OECD.

- Australia's weekly government parental leave payment covers on average 42% of previous earnings which adds up to an average 7.6 weeks of full-time payment (based on 18 weeks of parental leave payment at minimum wage).
- The UK provides higher parental leave payments than other English-speaking countries with 39 weeks of paid leave at an average rate of 31.3% of previous earnings, which equals 12.2 weeks of full-rate earnings.

**Table 2: Total paid leave entitlements available to mothers (includes paid maternity leave and paid parental leave available to mothers) 2013-14**

Country	Length of parental leave entitlements (weeks)	Average payment rate of national average earnings <sup>i</sup> (%)	Full-rate equivalent (weeks)
Australia	18.0	42.0	7.6
New Zealand	16.0	47.9	7.7
UK	39.0	31.3	12.2
US	0.0	0.0	0.0
Canada	52.0	52.6	27.3
Denmark	50.0	53.6	26.8
Germany	58.0	73.4	42.6
Sweden	60.0	63.4	38.1
OECD average <sup>ii</sup>	<b>54.1</b>		

Source: OECD (2016), Key characteristics of parental leave systems, viewed 6 December 2016, [https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2\\_1\\_Parental\\_leave\\_systems.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf)

## Men, paid parental leave entitlements and usage

Fathers', or partners', paid parental leave entitlements tend to be much shorter than parental leave for mothers or primary carers and it tends to be reasonably well remunerated. A majority of countries offer 2 weeks of father/partner leave around the birth/adoption of a child.

- OECD average of paid parental leave entitlement for fathers is 8.4 Weeks
- Most English-speaking countries such as US, Canada and New Zealand do not offer paid fathers' or partners' leave.
- Other countries, such as Australia and the UK offer two weeks at a minimum average pay rate.
- Germany offers 8.7 weeks at 65% of their average pay rate.

However, parental leave schemes across OECD countries increasingly aim to encourage fathers/carers to take time out of the workforce and fully care for their children. The OECD Family Database collects data on men's usage of government parental leave from member states.

While it is common for fathers to take a short time off around the birth of a child, their use of parental leave remains low or at best modest in most OECD countries (Table 3). This means that women continue to do the greater share of paid parental leave and continue to take time out of the workforce to look after children.

Table 3 shows:

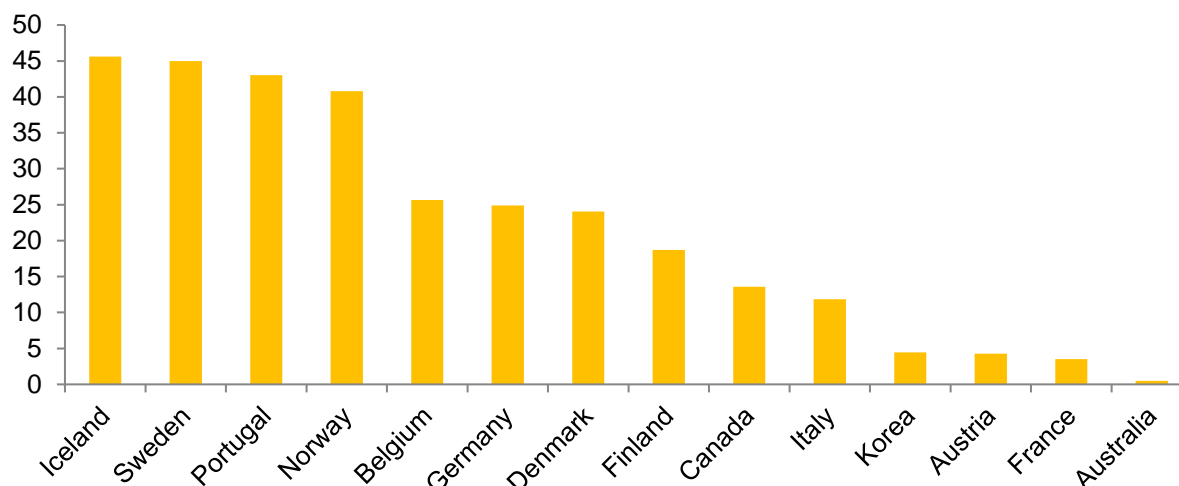
- Iceland, Sweden, Portugal and Norway have the highest percentage of men using publically administered paid parental leave.
- In the majority of countries the share of men taking parental leave is below 5%.

<sup>i</sup> The "average payment rate" refers to the proportion of previous earnings replaced by the benefit over the length of the paid leave entitlement for a person earning 100% of average national (2014) earnings. If this covers more than one period of leave at two different payment rates then a weighted average is calculated based on the length of each period. In most countries benefits are calculated on the basis of gross earnings, with the "payment rates" shown reflecting the proportion of gross earnings replaced by the benefit. In Austria, Chile, Germany and Romania (parental leave only) benefits are calculated based on previous net (post income tax and social security contribution) earnings, while in France benefits are calculated based on post-social-security-contribution earnings. Payment rates for these countries reflect the proportion of the appropriate net earnings replaced by the benefit. Additionally, in some countries maternity and parental benefits may be subject to taxation and may count towards the income base for social security contributions. As a result of taxation, the actual amounts received by the individual on leave may differ from those shown in the table.

<sup>ii</sup> OECD-33 average



**Table 3: Share of men using publically administered paid parental leave, 2013**



Source: OECD Family Database (2016), Use of childbirth-related leave by mothers and fathers, retrieved: <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2-2-Use-childbirth-leave.pdf>, viewed 30 June 2017

## Closing the parental leave usage gap

The following section highlights some parental leave schemes that encourage a more gender-neutral distribution of leave entitlements. It shows that in countries with a high utilisation of parental leave by fathers/partners:

- parental leave policies are flexible about when leave can be used, and
- parental leave payments are relatively high.

### Iceland

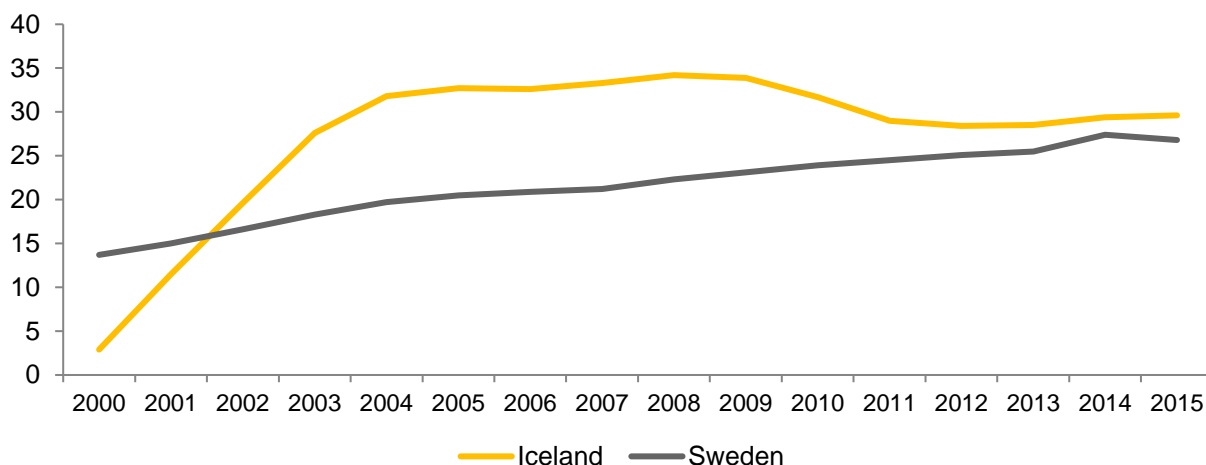
Paid parental leave in Iceland is currently nine months divided into a 3+3+3 formula: three months of maternity leave, three months of paternity leave and three months of parental leave.<sup>33</sup>

Since 2000, each parent (whereby the birth mother has to take the first 2 weeks after birth) in Iceland has the right to a three-month leave period, adoption or foster care placement. In addition, both parents have an equal right to the other three month parental leave period, which can be shared as they wish. The leave can be taken flexibly, parents can take it together or partly but it has to be taken within twenty-four months after the birth/adoption/placement of the child.<sup>34</sup>

The parental leave payments cover 80% of average total earnings, up to a ceiling of Euro 2,670 per month (as of October 2017).

The introduction of specific periods for each parent has led to a substantial increase of fathers taking parental leave from around 3% to 34% in 2008 in terms of days.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 4: Male share of number of days used in paid leave days in Iceland and Sweden (2000-2015)**



Source: Nordic Co-operation (2016), Parental leave, retrieved from: <http://www.norden.org/en/fakta-om-norden-1/gender-equality-indicators/family-and-care/parental-leave>, 24 August 2017

## Sweden

Sweden was the world's first country to introduce parental leave, replacing maternity leave.

In Sweden, parents are entitled to 480 days, or about 16 months, of paid parental leave on the birth or adoption of a child. Parents can take the leave by month, day or even by the hour up until the child turns eight.<sup>36</sup> Since 2002, each parent is entitled to two months of paid parental leave. This means that 60 days of leave are reserved for the second parent on a use-it-or-lose-it basis.

For 390 days or 13 months, parents are entitled to nearly 80% of their income, up to a maximum daily income of SEK 942 (approximately AU\$ 147). The remaining 90 days are paid at a flat daily rate of SEK 180 (AU\$ 28).<sup>37</sup>

Since 2016, three months of leave are allocated to each parent and cannot be transferred to the other parent. This means that parents who are not sharing the parental leave will lose three months of parental leave payment. Parents who share the parental leave also receive a tax-free daily bonus for a maximum of 270 days.

The parental leave policies have led to the increase of men using parental leave. Sweden has the second highest rate of men using parental leave across OECD countries and along with Denmark, Sweden has one of the highest female workforce participation rates at 76% (Australia's participation rate is 69%).<sup>38</sup>

## Germany

The current paid parental leave scheme ('Elterngeld') was introduced in 2007 and replaced the 'child-raising allowance'. The 'Elterngeld' represents a shift towards sustainable family policy because it is a salary substitute payment in the first year of the child, rather than a needs-tested payment for the first 24 months of the child's life.

A salary substitute parental payment means that parental leave payment covers 67% of after tax income and 100% of income below Euro 1 000 a month.

The government pays 'Elterngeld' for up to 12 months or 14 months if the second parent takes a minimum of two months of parental leave. The two months have to be taken by the second parent and are not transferable, but will be lost if not taken. To strengthen the work-family compatibility, the 'Elterngeld' can be converted into a part-time payment, if parents return to work on a part-time basis.<sup>39</sup>

Since the introduction of 'Elterngeld', women have reduced their time out of the workforce after the birth/adoption of a child. The female workforce participation rate of mothers with the youngest child over 12 months and less than 24 months increased substantially from was 32% in 2006 to 43% in 2015.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time the share of men taking paid parental leave increased from 5% in 2006 to 34% in 2014, leading to a lasting and more equal division of unpaid caring work.<sup>41</sup>

## Denmark

In Denmark, parents are entitled to a total of 52 weeks paid parental leave. There are three types of leave: leave during pregnancy, maternity leave and parental leave.

Mothers/adopting parents are entitled to take four weeks leave during pregnancy/or before adopting a child. Upon arrival of the child, the mother/one parent is entitled to 14 weeks of maternity leave after the birth (two weeks are compulsory immediately following childbirth) or adoption of a child and the father (co-parent) is entitled to take two weeks off. After this time, both parents are jointly entitled to 32 weeks of paid parental leave.<sup>42</sup> This time can be extended by 14 weeks, if parents apply for a reduction in the allowance during the total leave period.

In the first 20 weeks of parental leave payments, employees are entitled to a daily payment based on former earnings and up to a ceiling (Euro 570) per week before tax. It is common that collective agreements include compensation payments (about 84% of the total workforce is covered) which means that employees on parental leave receive employer top-up payments as agreed via the agreements.<sup>43</sup>

The parental leave may be taken any time up to the ninth birthday of the child.

Currently, Denmark does not have a so-called 'fathers quota' for parental leave. Instead, families can choose how the 32 weeks parental leave are split between them. Parents may also take time together. Around 24% of men are taking publically administered parental leave (Table 4). Research shows that the introduction of a father's quota between 1998 and 2002 had a lasting effect of fathers' usage of leave.<sup>44</sup> The temporary quota might have triggered a cultural shift towards greater acceptance of parental leave for fathers in workplaces and beyond.

## United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, parents are entitled to 52 weeks of parental leave, which comprises 39 weeks of paid leave and 13 weeks of unpaid leave.

Since 2015, employed mothers have the right to transfer all leave to the father/carer, except for two weeks after the birth under the Shared Parental Leave (SPL) scheme.<sup>45</sup> The scheme is designed to provide parents with more flexibility in how to care for their children in the first year after the birth/ adoption. Parents may take time off at the same time. Parents are eligible for this leave if they meet the 26 weeks employment and earnings criteria before the child is due.<sup>46</sup>

The parental leave payments cover 90% of women's average weekly earnings for the first six weeks with no ceiling. For the following 33 weeks, the payment covers either 90% or a flat rate of GBP 140 per week (as of September 2017).<sup>47</sup>

The UK government does not collect data on the utilisation of parental leave. Research suggests that the majority of leave is taken by mothers and, to date, the impact of the new SPL scheme on fathers taking parental leave is not clear. However, the new policy is designed to encourage fathers/partners to take leave.

## Conclusion

Most OECD countries have redefined their family policies from maternity to parental leave policies, largely reflecting changing societies and family structures, including the increase in female workforce participation rates.

Gender-balanced parental leave policies are a reflection of slowly disappearing gender-specific specialisations in paid and unpaid work.

Employers play a key role in normalising the uptake of fathers/partners taking parental leave and flexible working arrangements to meet caring responsibilities.

Overall, in Australia the use of parental leave by fathers/partners remains really low. Yet, international comparison of utilisation data and parental leave policies show that the use of parental leave by fathers increases when entitlements are generous and when policies offer flexibility about when leave can be used.

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