

Policy Program Paper

MAKING FATHERS CARE  
Parental Leave for Fathers in Israel  
**Policy Recommendations**

Nadav Perez

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# **Making Fathers Care**

## **Parental Leave for Fathers in Israel**

### **Policy Recommendations**

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### *Executive Summary*

- Parental leave for fathers is a policy program that has been proven to strengthen father involvement in household tasks, to contribute to the changing perceptions of division of household and childcare responsibilities, and to encourage greater equality for women in the labor force.
- The program of parental leave for fathers in Israel is, as of today, a complete failure. The rates of use of this program are less than half a percent. The satisfaction level of those in charge of the program (National Insurance Institute (NII)) as well as of users of the program as it is currently structured is very low.
- International studies show that a program's structure has a dramatic impact on its rate of use. Putting in place a program that is appropriate to the needs of fathers can raise significantly the possibility of their taking parental leave.
- A change in the structure of the parental leave program in Israel as will be recommended is predicted to bring a significant rise in the rate of fathers who will choose to participate in the program.

## *Policy Recommendations*

- In order to bring about a substantial change in program participation rates, the length of parental leave in Israel must be significantly lengthened for mothers and fathers as one. The influence of the other recommended changes to be described will be limited.
- The parental leave program that is being recommended is the Icelandic program, which dedicates three months paid leave exclusively for the mother, three months exclusively for the father, and three months that are transferable between the couple.
- Parental leave should be given to the family unit and not to the mother. The rights to parental leave for fathers should be severed from those of the mother, and the requirement of the mother's written permission for her partner to use the parental leave should be discontinued.
- The division of the leave time between the couple should be much more flexible. The minimum amount of leave time should be reduced from the 21 days as is customary today to a period of no more than a week.

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## *1. Introduction*

For many years the struggle for equality between men and women has focused on women's integration into the work force. It could be said and with some justification, that the goal has been accomplished: the status of women as "housewives" – a woman who does not participate in the labor force and whose energy is directed towards household work for which she receives no monetary remuneration – does not exist any longer in most developed countries (Lewis, 2001; Orloff, 2006). In Israel, too, the rate of women who participate in the labor market has increased dramatically in the past decades and today the majority of women of working age work outside the home, with labor force participation rates that are close to those of men, especially among Jewish women (Okun & Oliver, 2009).

This near equality in labor force participation rates underlines the lack of equality between men and women in other areas of the labor market. World-wide, in general, and in Israel, in particular, the level of financial compensation for women is significantly lower than for men and the work day is generally shorter for women than for men. Women are also concentrated in a limited number of professions, professional roles, and in "female" sector jobs with salary, advancement opportunities, and prestige that is lower than "male" jobs.

One of the main reasons for this continued inequality is the lack of equality in the home. The marked rise in women's labor force participation was not accompanied by a parallel rise in the participation of men in housework and the division of labor in the home has remained largely traditional, with the bulk of the responsibility continuing to be on the woman. Many times, men and women have the same number of salaried work hours and yet the woman is largely responsible for household and childcare. The amount of time that women spend on housework is tens of times

higher than what men spend (Sullivan, 2000; Sullivan, Coltraine, McAnnally, Altintas, 2009), while the number of hours that each spend working for pay is very similar (Bianchi, Milkie, 2010; Bianchi, Raley, 2005; Sayer, 2005). The situation is no different in Israel (Glickman, Oren, Lewin-Epstine, 2003).

Welfare policy towards families has a central role in shaping the patterns of the division of labor in the home. The range of possibilities for women and men are defined by a triangle between the relations within the family, the possibilities offered by the labor force, and government policy. This range of options determines each member of the couple's ability to participate in the labor market for pay with the added responsibility of making sure that the needs of dependents (children and others) are taken care of adequately. Various welfare programs may help with equal division of responsibilities like childcare, elderly care, and care of dependents (Orloff, 1993; Lewis, 1992, 1997).

In its first years, welfare policy gender research busied itself with the range of options available for women and with the possibilities for finding alternatives for her childcare responsibilities. It examined care services that could be purchased in the market place on the one hand, and the intervention of the State in this market on the other hand, as the two factors that influence women entering the work force (Gornick & Meyers, 2003).

In the last decade, researchers have stressed that the division of labor in the home, and therefore gender relations in the workplace, can only be changed after a significant change in the behavior of men in the home and in the number of hours they devote to household tasks. In light of this insight, researchers agree that in order to bring about equality in the labor market, government policy should focus, among other things, also on changing the role of the father in the home (Hobson, 2002).

One of the main tools that policy makers have to encourage male participation in household tasks is the parental leave for fathers

program. Intensive involvement of the father in his infant's care can ease women's integration in the labor force, enhance father involvement in household responsibilities, and thus contribute to creating more equality in the home (Gornick & Meyers, 2008). Many countries have, in fact, put programs in place that allow fathers to participate in parental leave that is given to mothers. Israel is also a member of this club that allows men to divide the parental leave given to mothers; although, as will be shown, it is not enough to have a program. The specific features of the program have an essential influence on the participation rate of men, and, what is more, also on the State's ability to influence the division of labor in the home. The Israeli program is poor on international standards and does not encourage fathers to participate in parental leave. It will require an overhaul if it is to become more attractive.



## 2. *Parental Leave for Fathers in Israel*

In 1994 MK Avraham Poraz laid on the table of the Knesset the *Women's Labor Act (Amendment: Parental Leave for Fathers)*. Poraz proposed in this law to allow men to take paid parental leave after the birth of a child.

The legislation had two different lines of reasoning. The first, which was stressed in the process of becoming law, was giving the mother the opportunity to return to the labor force faster so as to limit the damage to her career. The second was to allow fathers who were interested in it to spend quality time in childcare. In the process of discussions, the first reason received the most attention while the second became marginal. In other words – the subject of changing the division of labor in the home or influencing patterns of behavior for dividing workloads was not of major importance (Perez, 2010).

The process of passing the proposed legislation was a protracted affair and took three years. In 1997 the proposal became law – *Amendment 14 to the Women's Labor Act (Temporary Order)* – and established in law a trial period of three years during which men could take parental leave. In 2001 the Temporary Order was extended for an additional three year period with certain adjustments made to the law. In 2004 the law was extended again and some of the adjustments were repealed; in 2007 the Temporary Order became a permanent law.

The law stipulates the conditions under which an employee is able to take paternal leave and the features of that leave. In order to qualify for leave, the employee must meet certain criteria:

First, he must be entitled to leave – that is, he has to have accrued the same amount of work time as a woman must to qualify for maternity leave. In order to qualify for parental leave, the man must be employed for 10 of the last 15 months or 15 of the last 22 months prior to leave-taking.

Second, the entitlement of the father is dependent upon the mother's entitlement. That is, the mother has to be entitled to receive the benefit according to the criteria previously specified. In addition, the mother must make written notification that she forfeits her maternity leave and passes it to her partner. She must also return to work to insure her partner's entitlement to parental leave.

If the father is entitled to parental leave according to these conditions, he can only take leave from the end of the sixth week after the birth of the child. Since the length of paid parental leave is 14 weeks in Israel, the maximum length of parental leave for fathers is eight weeks. The minimum length of such leave is 21 days. Thus, in practice, the length of parental leave for the father is somewhere between three and eight weeks.

The amount of parental leave pay that the father receives is calculated in the same way as the pay that the mother receives. The rate is set at 100% of the last salary that the father received from his employer and no more than five times the average salary in the market place. It is worth noting that, in practice, the significance of this is that the parental leave pay for fathers is higher than for women since men's salaries are, in general, higher than women's.

Implementation of this legislation was problematic to say the least. From the beginning it was found that Israeli men do not use the entitlement and the situation has not changed considerably over the years. The data from the National Insurance Institute show very low program utilization rates. As can be seen in Table 1, the number of men who share parental leave with their partners remains low, with only a few hundred per year – without any significant change over the years. In relative terms, the rate of men receiving parental leave payment – that is among those who chose to take advantage of the benefit and received payment – never rose above a third of a percent in all the years that the National Insurance Institute published data. Despite the fact that there is a small rise in the rate of men taking advantage of parental leave payment, the rise is very slow and is not

expected to reach any significant level in the near future unless substantial changes are made in the factors that encourage fathers to take advantage of this benefit.

**Table 1. Recipients of Parental Leave Payment by Gender, 1998-2007**  
(selected years\*)

<b>Year</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Percent of men from all recipients</b>
1998-1999*	109,237	281	0.26%
2003	73,948	123	0.17%
2004	77,505	150	0.19%
2005	77,025	157	0.20%
2006	83,285	199	0.24%
2007	88,147	246	0.28%

\* The data was available for selected years only.

\*\* This period is something over a year, from the beginning of Amendment 14 to the Women's Labor Act (May 1998) until the end of 1999.

**Source:** Data from Eliav, 2001; Toledano, 2008.

How can this low rate be explained? Who are the men who choose to take advantage of this benefit and why do they do so? There is little research on this subject. Avishag Rager (2002) interviewed men who went on parental leave and found – on the policy level – that they had harsh criticism of the leave-taking program. The fathers who were interviewed pointed to three major deficiencies in the existing program:

First, the short time allotted to parental leave. The fathers maintained that the short period of the leave – in those days, 12 weeks – did not allow the mother sufficient time to recover physically from the birth in order to return to work and pass the childcare on to her partner. Many fathers mentioned this short time frame as a central concern in deciding whether to take the parental leave or not.

The second consideration was the men's dependence on their partner for their entitlement to parental leave. This dependence is from

two perspectives: firstly, the mother must be entitled to receive maternity leave in order for the man to be entitled; and secondly, the man's entitlement is conditional on the mother's one-sided consent and written confirmation that she forfeits her leave and passes the right over to him.

The men interviewed by Rager felt that this was evidence that the benefit is not given to both partners rather to the woman – who then has the right to transfer the benefit. This feature of the program discouraged fathers from using the benefit both on the practical level but even more so on the symbolic level. Building the program in this way transmits the message to fathers who might want to participate that they are in some way exceptions and to some extent they are a right that belongs to their partner.

The third deficiency mentioned by fathers related to the economic harm they experienced by going on parental leave. At the time of the study, parental leave payment was restricted to twice the average salary (as opposed to five times the average which was at that time the rule for women's salary and is now the case for both men and women alike). Since one of the characteristics of these men was their high average salary, many of them felt harmed by this limitation which is no longer the case. Today, only a small minority earn more than the ceiling of five times the market average.

Alongside the criticisms expressed by the law's target group, there was also criticism from the body responsible for implementing the law – the National Insurance Institute. Representatives of the National Insurance Institute expressed their objections to lengthening the trial period for the law when they were asked their opinion during the Knesset debates for the law's first extension in 2001. After that, on other occasions, they insisted on including additional restrictions to make entitlement more difficult than it was intended.

The opposition to the law on the part of representatives of the National Insurance Institute came from a high rate of reports of abuse of the program. According to their claims, a high proportion of the

few men who benefitted from the law were abusing the National Insurance Institute system and receiving monies to which they were not entitled. In the Labor, Welfare and Health Committee of the Knesset, data of the National Insurance Institute was presented (unpublished) of a random check of 20% of the men filing parental leave payment claims. It was found that some 70% of them filed fraudulent claims to the authority, like reporting that they had left work in order to enjoy the money from the National Insurance Institute while they were, in fact, still at work. These data are subject to debate although there is no doubt that the percent of denied requests for parental leave for fathers is higher than the normal rate at the National Insurance Institute.

The rates of use of the program are so low as to be meaningless. Amongst those using the program, a substantial percent abuse the entitlement, and the others who use the program are generally dissatisfied with it. In view of the clear failure of the program the question remains: What has caused the failure of the program that was supposed to enable fathers to take parental leave?

Lawmakers attributed the failure to the conservative nature of Israeli men when it comes to matters of gender, family, and the division of labor in the home. They claim that in the conservative Israeli culture men are reluctant to take care of children.<sup>1</sup> In this work, though, the focus will not be on cultural reasons for the failure of the program rather on the characteristics of the program itself which are simply not attractive to fathers.

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<sup>1</sup> As for example, MK Avraham Poraz in the Protocol No. 414 of the Labor and Welfare Committee of the 13<sup>th</sup> Knesset, page 11.

### *3. Parental Leave for Fathers — An International Perspective*

A survey of the policy regarding parental leave for fathers in welfare states around the world – with an emphasis on Western and Northern Europe, North America, and Australia – allows a comparative analysis of different programs.

As an introduction to the examination of the specific arrangements for fathers, a comparison of the general characteristics of parental leave programs shows that the parental leave in Israel is significantly shorter than what is accepted in other countries. The length of leave in Israel is 14 weeks, and a parent can take leave without pay for a period of up to one year from the day of the child's birth.

Of the 21 Western countries compared, it was found that Israel is in the bottom third for duration of leave without pay, while with regard to paid leave, Israel offers parents the worst conditions – except for Australia<sup>2</sup> and the United States, which do not give leave of this sort and Switzerland, that gives 11 weeks – (the comparison was done by Ray, Gornick and Schmitt (2008)). The rate of reimbursement in Israel, a rate of 100% of the average salary on the eve of leave-taking, is significantly higher than the reimbursement rate in most of the countries, and this component improves Israel's place in the comparison. Nevertheless, even when this factor is weighted and the number of weeks of paid leave at full compensation are calculated, the gap is narrowed but Israel's position changes little (ibid).<sup>3</sup>

Parental leave for fathers must first be understood in the context of the length of the leave and in light of the fact that the parental leave

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that since the beginning of 2011 Australia enacted parental leave for a period of 18 weeks.

<sup>3</sup> In a comparison of all of the OECD countries regarding the length of paid leave, Israel's situation is slightly better and it is placed in 29<sup>th</sup> place out of 39 countries (OECD, 2010).

for both mothers and fathers is particularly short in comparison to most of the other Western countries. The second characteristic, which is particular to fathers, touches on the component of the level of choice in taking leave. That is, the arrangements for parental leave for fathers can be divided into those that allow them to take part in the leave, and those that force them to do so (Fox, Pascall & Warren, 2009; Brandt & Kvande, 2001). The arrangements that “allow” leave for fathers – which was traditionally intended for mothers only – turn it into something gender neutral, and allow parents to decide who between them will take leave. The arrangements that “force” leave-taking delineate specific time periods that can be used exclusively by the father and specify that should the father not use the leave, it is forfeited and the mother cannot use it either.

Specific parental leave programs designed for fathers began to appear in Scandinavia in the 70s. In 1974 Sweden changed maternity leave into parental leave – and allowed both partners to make use of it. Norway went through a similar change a few years later, and since then the change has made its way through the European countries in one form or another (Fox et al., 2009). In 1996 the European Union issued a directive instructing member countries to adopt parental leave that is gender neutral<sup>4</sup> (Hobson, Duvander & Hallden, 2006). Today, all the welfare states, except for Switzerland, allow fathers to take part in one way or another in parental leave (Ray et al., 2008).

In 1993 Norway was pioneering in setting down that one month of the leave, whose length was at that time set at a year, is dedicated exclusively for fathers; and in the case where a father chooses not to take the month’s leave, the mother is not able to use it and it is lost (Lappegard, 2008). In this way, Norway was the first country to make arrangements that “force” the father to take parental leave. Sweden quickly followed suit and they both actually enlarged the arrangement

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<sup>4</sup> The instruction differentiates between parental leave which is available to both parents together and maternal leave which is available just to mothers.

to two months leave for the father alone. This arrangement also spread throughout Europe although it remained less common than arrangement that “allowed” fathers to take leave (Ray et al., 2008). Iceland is the country that adopted the most wide-ranging arrangement whereby three months leave is dedicated for the exclusive use of the mother, three months leave is dedicated for the father, and three months is transferable leave to be divided between the couple (Lewis, 2009).

The amount that these programs are fully utilized changes. At the beginning, even in the Nordic countries where the programs were first established, the utilization rate was low – at just a few percent (Haataja, 2009). Over the years, there has been a great deal of difference between countries: in some of them, like Germany<sup>5</sup> and France (Almqvist, 2008), the utilization rate does not reach ten percent, while in other countries, like Australia (Whitehouse, Diamond & Baird, 2007) and Canada (Marshall, 2008), the utilization rate is in the tens of percents and, since the mid 90s, in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland the vast majority of fathers use their portion of parental leave (Haataja, 2009; Lappegard, 2008).

The rates at which men use this benefit do not indicate that parental leave has become equal even in the Nordic countries. It is important to differentiate between two types of data – the proportion of men who participate in parental leave and the number of days that men take for parental leave. Whereas the majority of men in the Nordic countries take parental leave, the number of days that they take is far less than the number of days taken by women. Thus, parental leave remains largely a female option. In addition, there is a difference of opinion regarding to what extent parental leave used by fathers is actually used for childcare or for other needs (Eydal, 2009).

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<sup>5</sup> Although in recent years there have been significant changes in Germany in this regard; see the details in the discussion that follows.



#### *4. Comparative Studies on Parental Leave Arrangements*

There is a great deal of difference between countries in the characteristics of parental leave programs for fathers and in the extent to which fathers participate in these programs. This has made many researchers wonder: How can the difference in participation rates of men in parental leave be explained and, in particular, how do the various features of the parental leave program influence the male participation rates?

One of the issues that has been studied is the influence of policy changes on the participation rate of fathers in parental leave programs. Researchers have used the opportunity of policy changes to examine its influence. In this way the influence of other intervening variables could be controlled, like cultural differences, the structure of the labor market, and so on.

Trude Lappegard (Lappegard, 2008) examined the introduction of “Father’s Month” in Norway and its influence on the pattern of parental leave taking for fathers. Her findings show a significant effect on patterns of parental leave taking. Until the institution of “Father’s Month” participation rates of fathers in parental leave taking programs was just a few percent (2-4 percent). After introduction of “Father’s Month” participation rates soared by over ten times in one year, to the rate of 33 percent, and they continued to rise quickly until they reached a rate of 85 percent of the fathers who were entitled to take the leave.

The change that was found was not one-sided. Alongside the dramatic rise in participation rate for fathers in parental leave programs, there was a drop in the number of average days that fathers took in parental leave. Lappegard explained this as follows: when there is a period of time designated solely for fathers, the fathers limited their leave-taking to that amount of time. Prior to the

institution of “Father’s Month” the few father’s who took parental leave mostly took extended periods of leave, while after the project, many fathers took only the time allotted them by the parental leave program.

Dominique Pérusse (2003) describes the changes in the Canadian parental leave program introduced in 2001. These changes included a significant extension of the parental leave time from 25 to 50 weeks as well as a substantial easing of the conditions of entitlement. Despite the fact that the changes were not targeting fathers, they had a striking effect on the use of the program. The rate of father participation in leave taking rose after the change by about five times (alongside a doubling of the rate that women used the parental leave program).

Canada and Norway are considered countries that revere gender equality. The findings show, though, that even in those countries where gender ideology venerates the family, like Germany, a change in policy can bring about changes in the utilization rates of parental leave programs by fathers.

Jochen Kluge and Marcus Tamm (2009) examine the changes in Germany following the Elterngeld Reform in 2007. The reform included a significant extension of parental leave, an increase in the birth grant, and a substantial benefit to couples where both partners participated in the parental leave program granting them an additional two months leave period. Kluge and Tamm looked at the patterns of program utilization during the three months that preceded and the three months immediately following the implementation of these changes. They explained that the changes in the program had a significant influence on utilization rates and on the division of labor in the home. First, the number of fathers taking parental leave immediately rose to 16 percent. Second, according to parent reporting, the amount of time that fathers devoted to caring for their children after the program changes were implemented doubled – men reported that before the change they spent 22 percent of the total time spent by the couple doing housework and some 45 percent after.

The importance of this study is that it shows that even in countries with relatively conservative gender attitudes – like Germany and Israel – the structure of arrangements of parental leave can have a significant effect on the way that families divide the roles in the household and in the labor market.

Peter Moss and Martha Korintus (Moss & Korintus, 2008) examined the use of parental leave for fathers in a variety of European countries and identified four factors that influence the utilization rates of fathers.

The first factor with the greatest amount of influence on father's participation rates was the **individuation** of the leave taking. Leave that is given individually – that is, dedicated for the father and not transferable to the mother, as in the “Father's Month” in Scandinavia – results in participation rates that are very high in the father's dedicated time; and at the same time, it brings a decrease in the utilization rate of men during the period of time designed for joint leave taking by the couple.

The second factor whose influence was also significant was the **duration of the parental leave** time. Short parental leave is not used by fathers and is reserved almost exclusively for the mother. For fathers to share the parental leave time with the mother, it must be long enough to allow the mother to recover from the birth and from a period of time of nursing and also leave the father a significant amount of time for leave-taking (Kershaw, 2006).

The third factor is the level of **compensation** for parental leave. In all the Western countries men's income is higher than women's, and the family relies predominantly on the man's income. Therefore, when birth grants are significantly less than the salary of the person taking leave, men are reluctant to take off and leave this to the women.

The final factor is **flexibility** of the leave. The more flexibility is given to the partners to choose the way the leave time is divided between them, the more likely they are to do so. The freedom can be expressed in terms of the minimum amount of the time of the leave. In

Israel, the leave can be divided in three week units while in other countries the minimum amount of leave is a week or even a single day. Some programs, for example in Sweden, even allows parents to take advantage of parental leave by working part-time work.

### *5. Spheres of Influence of Parental Leave for Fathers*

As a result of the expanding phenomenon of parental leave for fathers and in the number of men who participate in the program, researchers have been asked to evaluate the impact of men taking leave in three main areas: the division of labor in the home, the participation of women in the salary labor force, the good of the children.

In the area of the **division of labor in the home**, researchers have tried to assess whether instituting parental leave for fathers brought about more equitable division of labor at home – that is, a rise in the number of hours that men spent in housework. A change in perception for the two parents that brings about long-term changes in their joint participation in the household chores lasting for years is very difficult to measure and nearly impossible to attribute to a single factor. Thus, researchers in this field concentrated on the short-term impact of parental leave (O'Brian & Moss, 2010).

The studies point to a significant rise in the number of hours that men spent in childcare and in housework if they take parental leave. Studies by Kluve & Tamm (2009) showed a doubling of the number of hours that men devoted to household tasks immediately upon institution of parental leave for fathers. In a more extensive study that compared between Sweden, Norway, and England, Sullivan and his colleagues (Sullivan et al., 2009) found that the nature of the social policy towards fathers, in particular on parental leave for fathers, has a significant influence on the amount of time that fathers devote to

childcare. In Britain, where only a small minority of men participate in parental leave, the number of minutes that fathers spend in childcare is exceptionally low in both international comparisons and relative to mothers. The pattern of participation of fathers in Sweden and in Norway is influenced specifically by the nature of the policy. The length of parental leave in Norway is a year and it has relatively little flexibility; the leave in Sweden is even longer and its can be divided with great ease. As a result, fathers in Norway spend more time in childcare during the first year of the child's life but less during the following years; fathers in Sweden spend a great deal of time in childcare on an on-going basis for the first few years of their child's life (Sullivan et al., 2009).

Other studies show that even after the parental leave period it is possible to see a difference in patterns of behavior amongst fathers. A study conducted in Britain shows that fathers who took parental leave were more likely to take more care of their children, to change diapers, to get up in the middle of the night, even when the child was a year old – that is, nine months after the parental leave (Tanaka & Waldfogel, 2007). In a similar study conducted in the United States, the rates of childcare increased only amongst those fathers who took parental leave of two weeks or more (Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007). A study in Iceland that compared men's childcare habits before and after extended parental leave was instituted in 2000, showed a rise in the rate of couples declaring that childcare was divided equally between them and the rise continued for another three years (Eydal, 2009).

It is possible to conclude from the majority of cases that were examined that parental leave for fathers has a significant impact on changes in the patterns of the division of labor in the home. During the leave period, fathers increase their hours devoted to childcare significantly and in some cases to a level almost equal to that of the mother. This impact remains for several months even after the end of the leave period, and it could be surmised that the effects lasted for

even longer as noted by Eydal (Eydal, 2009) and Sullivan and his colleagues (Sullivan et al., 2009).

With regard to the employment of women, due to methodological difficulties, only a few studies have been able to examine the relation between men utilizing parental leave and patterns of female participation in the labor force. The Icelandic study quoted previously found that the possibility of men taking parental leave had no influence on the rate of women participating in the labor force, although it had a significant effect on narrowing the gap in work hours between fathers and mothers, three years after the birth (Eydal, 2009). In another study it was found that the income of women in Sweden, when both partners took parental leave, was harmed less than for women whose partners did not participate in parental leave with them (Haas & Hwang, 1999). It seems, therefore, that there is a measure of support for the claim that men taking parental leave improves the status of women at work and narrows the gender gap in the labor force.

Nevertheless the central claim in favor of parental leave for fathers does not touch on the immediate gain for women from their partner's leave-taking, like the possibility of bridging the different interests of motherhood and children. While the needs of the labor market dictate parental leave for women at a half a year, the infants needs dictate close care by parents for at least the first year.

Numerous studies point to the fact that the ideal length of paid parental leave from the perspective of the market place needs of women is half a year. Galtry and Callister (2005) found, based on a number of studies, that paid parental leave for a period of nine months is likely to have a negative effect on the women's prospects for returning to work, for her prospects of advancement, and for future salary. A leave without pay, of any length, has a similar effect. The studies have found, though, that paid parental leave of a period of less than nine months does not have harmful long-term implications on a woman's career development or her salary. From the perspective of the impact on salary, research has found that even in countries that

have female-friendly policies – which are also those countries with narrow gender salary gaps – when the influence of specific policy is isolated from the structure of equal salaries extended parental leave still has a negative influence on women’s salaries (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Stier & Mandel, 2009).

From the point of view of the **mother’s health**, studies have had difficulty determining the length of rest that is necessary to recover from delivery. This is because recovery is dependent on a number of factors, amongst them the nature of the delivery, the support of the father and the community, the woman’s health prior to the delivery, as well as emotional, psychological and social factors. Nevertheless, researchers agree that the amount of time is somewhere between 12 weeks (McGovern, Dowd, Gjerdingen, Moscovice, Kochevar & Lohman, 1997) and half a year (Tulman & Fawcett, 1991).

With regard to **insuring the health and development of the infant**. Alongside the role of parental leave in assuring the health and professional future of the woman, it also has a no-less important function to insure the health and development of the infant. There is consensus amongst researchers that parental leave of at least six months has a positive influence on the health of the infant. International comparisons have proven that longer paid parental leave reduces infant mortality rates (Tanaka, 2005). Research in the United States has shown that short parental leave, of less than three months, harms the health of the child through lower rates of breastfeeding, fewer doctor visits for developmental checks, and lower adherence rates to vaccination schedules (Berger, Hill & Waldfogel, 2005).

The issue of breastfeeding is especially relevant when dealing with parental leave for fathers. There is a general consensus in the medical community – amongst them the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) and the Israeli Ministry of Health (Ministry of Health, 2005) – that breastfeeding exclusively for the first half year and continuing for at least the first year has a significant influence on the health of the infant. Research has found that returning early to work – especially in

a full-time position – has a decidedly negative influence on the woman’s ability to continue breastfeeding. It was also found that in order to insure continued breastfeeding after the woman has returned to work, parental leave should be at least 16 weeks after birth, in order to allow breast milk to be pumped as well as individual care for the infant (Galtry & Callister, 2005).

Against these decisive findings that speak to the advantages of longer parental leave for the physical health of the infant, the findings regarding developmental advantages of longer leave are less significant. In the past, developmental researchers were of the opinion that infant development required a lengthy period exclusively with the mother (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1952). Today this approach is no longer accepted and researchers stress that the important thing is bonding between the child and both parents and what is more, personal “one-on-one” care for an extended period after birth. The studies do not come to any conclusion regarding the exact length of time that is required or the specific advantages of certain periods of time. Suffice to say that the emotional and cognitive needs of the infant require personal care until approximately age one (Galtry & Callister, 2005).<sup>6</sup>

There is a contradiction between the employment needs of the mother – parental leave of half a year – and the developmental needs of the infant which require personal care of at least a year from birth. Gornick and Meyers (2008) point out that the solution lies in breaking the assumption that the main caregiver for the infant must needs be the mother. They suggest parental leave of a year that is composed of half a year exclusively for the mother and half a year exclusively for the

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<sup>6</sup> The length of time that an infant needs personal care cannot be separated from the question of the quality of alternate care facilities for infants. When institutions are of high quality, their use at an early stage is not expected to damage the infant. Nevertheless, considering the supply of infant care institutions in Israel, it could be said that parental leave of a year is probably the best care for the child.



father. In the event that the father does not use his right, the mother's entitlement will be impacted and her leave will be shortened. Parental leave in this format insures no long-term harm to the professional development of the mother, appropriate health, emotional and cognitive care for the infant, and equal opportunity for the father to be involved in child-rearing.

On the other hand, the possible **negative effects of parental leave**, on the father cannot be ignored. Experience from those countries instituting large-scale parental leave and in particular in Sweden and Norway, have shown that the main obstacle for fathers wanting to take parental leave is the negative attitude of employers (Brandt & Kvende, 2001; Lammi-Taskula, 2007). From the employer's perspective, a male employee request for parental leave is a signal of low dedication to the workplace. Even though no research evidence of this has been found, it can be assumed that such a perception on the part of the employer has a negative influence on both opportunities for advancement and salary, a process that is similar to a great extent to what women experience when they take parental leave. As Haas & Hwang (2009) have noted the extent of this phenomenon lessens the more parental leave for fathers becomes common and employers get used to fathers taking leave. It cannot be expected, though, that the phenomenon will disappear all together.

It is possible to see that this actually serves to increase equality in the labor market as it lessens the harm to women at the man's expense. Although it should be remembered that harming the husband's salary, which in most cases is decidedly greater, harms the whole family unit.

When it comes time to make recommendations regarding parental leave for fathers, it is important to remember the potential damage to family income. Planning should keep this harm to a minimum and the program should be implemented along with continuous evaluation to make sure that steps are taken to lessen any such damage.

## *6. Conclusion and Recommendations*

From this survey two main conclusions arise: First, the characteristics of the program for including men in parental leave have a significant influence on their utilization rates; second, low participation rates in Israel are the result of the program structure which does not encourage male participation according to criteria set out by Moss & Korintus (2008).

In terms of one feature – the compensation level of the birth grant – the Israeli parental leave program is good, and even very good, in European terms. Parental leave of 100 percent of the pre-leave level, and with a high ceiling (five times the average salary) places Israel at the top of European countries – like Norway and even better than Sweden. Nevertheless, in light of the other characteristics of parental leave in Israel, this positive one does not manage to outweigh the others.

The short period of Israeli parental leave is a striking feature of the program which does not place Israel in a good position relative to other countries. As indicated previously, very few countries have as short a parental leave period as Israel. A research review and international comparison shows that the overall length of the parental leave period has a significant influence on male participation rates and the estimate is that this factor has a central role in the low utilization rates for Israeli men.

The third feature that Moss and Korintus note, the flexibility of the leave program, also places Israel in a relatively low standing against programs in the majority of European countries, where fathers are allowed flexibility in beginning and ending their leave taking as well as in the way they divide the time with the mother. Parental leave in Israel allows a minimum of flexibility as it obligates fathers to take a leave of at least three weeks.

The final characteristic that influences utilization rates of parental leave and by far the most significant one is the individuation of the program – that is, the amount that the program dedicates separate times for the man or for the couple which can be divided as they see fit. This is the most important criterion according to Moss and Korintus, and on this feature, the Israeli program fails miserably: not only does it not have a dedicated time for the father, it also does not contain a time for the couple and as such, the program is almost explicitly for mothers with fathers designated as a “replacement mother.”

The fact that the program is for mothers only is apparent from the many conditions that link the father’s entitlement to his partner. For instance, a father who has worked the required period prior to the leave-taking is not eligible for the parental leave if his partner has not worked the required period as well; the man’s taking parental leave requires the explicit written consent of the woman; and, the procedure that best signifies that the program is targeted at women and not their partners is the fact that the birth grant for the period of parental leave taken by the father is deposited into the woman’s bank account.

The research in Israel matches these insights. As stated previously, Rager (2002) also found that the length of the parental leave and the dependence on the mother are two significant factors that make it difficult for fathers to take leave. Parental leave for fathers in Israel is planned and built in a way that makes it unattractive for fathers and this goes a long way to explain the near zero utilization rates of the program.

In order to change this situation, to make the program more attractive, and to raise the participation rates of fathers in parental leave, the following steps are recommended:

- **Setting parental leave for the mother of three months, three months for the father, and three months to be divided between the couple.** This recommendation deals with the main feature of

the Israeli parental leave – its short duration – which serves as a barrier for men who want to participate. A significant lengthening of the leave is likely to be a major step forward from the perspective of fathers who want to use this entitlement. Although the program most recommended in the literature gives half a year leave to the mother and half a year to the father, the “Icelandic model,” as suggested here, has an advantage that it is a program that has been instituted and its results were positively evaluated (as described in this paper).

It is worth noting that without a significant extension of the duration of the leave, no substantial change is expected in the rates of fathers taking leave in Israel in order to take care of their children. Likewise, the program’s influence on the division of labor in the home will remain limited.

- **The dedication of a period during the parental leave explicitly for the father.** This recommendation completes the previous one and is both important and relevant only if the leave period is extended. There is no doubt that designating a period will significantly raise the utilization rates of fathers. On the other hand, if this allocation comes at the expense of the already short period of leave for the mother, its harm could outweigh the good that it does. A dedicated time for fathers is only recommended if it goes hand-in-hand with a significant increase in the parental leave time as previously discussed.

The first recommendation requires a deep change in the social perception and in the socio-political climate. The chances of this happening are slim. For this reason, the following series of recommendations are made to contribute to raising the participation rates of fathers to some extent, even if it is less than “sweeping.” These suggestions take into consideration factors that are reasonable to achieve in the current political climate, and they can be expected to

bring some improvement (albeit not a revolution) in program utilization rates:

- **Sever the dependence of the father's leave on the entitlement of the mother.** It is recommended to abolish the dependence of the father's parental leave on the mother's qualification period; to rescind the requirement of the mother's written consent for the father's entitlement; and, to enable fathers to receive the money paid for the parental leave.

The first step has multiple meanings and will bring more couples into the circle of entitlement who currently are not qualified for parental leave and is expected to increase dramatically (compared to today) the utilization rates for the program. The other two steps – rescinding the written consent and giving the money directly to the father – are significant mainly because they are symbolic. The importance of symbolism cannot be minimized and is important for men who are weighing the possibility of taking leave and can influence utilization rates.

- **Increasing the flexibility of the program and decreasing the minimum amount of leave-taking for fathers to seven days.** The minimum duration of leave taking for men today is 21 days. As described previously, an inflexible framework dissuades men from taking leave. At the time of the preparation of the original law the minimum time was set at 21 days in consideration of the paperwork involved for the National Insurance Institute. In light of the improvements in technology over the past 15 years, it is reasonable to assume that the paperwork involved is considerably less complicated and it is obvious that this limitation has a negative effect on the participation rate of men in the program.

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