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## **Equal legal rights to paid parental leave – the case of Iceland**

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## **Abstract**

Comprehensive child-care policies are one of the main characteristics of the Scandinavian or Nordic welfare state, and policies on care and gender equality are regarded as the key explanatory factors for the high labour market participation of women in general (mothers in particular) in the Nordic countries. Yet, at the same time, the policies have not ensured the participation of fathers in the care of their young children nor gender equality in the labour market. During the post-war period, Iceland provided less support to families than the other Nordic countries but over the past two decades public support for childcare has been increased. Day-care services have been expanded and the law enacted in 2000 on parental leave, provided parents with equal entitlements to paid parental leave.

The aim of the 2000 legislation was twofold: to ensure that children enjoy the care of both parents; and to enable both parents the opportunity to coordinate family and work life (Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave no. 95/2000). The statistics show that take-up rates of fathers are high and that in most cases they take three months paid parental leave. Two surveys were conducted, one before the law was enacted and one after the law came into force in order to provide data on the estimated importance of the equal rights of parents to paid parental leave. The aim of this paper is to examine the influences of these changes. Are parents dividing paid work and the care of their young children more equally after the law came into force, and thus reaching the twofold goal of the 2000 Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave?

The paper will discuss Icelandic care policies, emphasising the 2000 Act. The paper will examine the surveys, their design and structure, and most importantly the results of the surveys will be presented and discussed. Finally, the paper will summarize the findings and examine whether it is possible to tell if the Act's goals have been reached.

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## Introduction

Iceland is a European republic with a population of just over 300.000. It is an island in the North Atlantic situated between Greenland and Norway. It is one of the five Nordic or Scandinavian countries. Comprehensive equality and childcare policies are one of the main characteristics of the Scandinavian or Nordic welfare model (e.g. Bradshaw and Hatland, 2006; Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006b; Kangas and Rostgaard, 2007).

The goal of the Nordic welfare system has been to promote the dual-earner/dual-carer family, where both parents participate in work and the care of their children (Leira, 2006). During the 1990s, all the Nordic countries established an independent right of fathers to paternity leave in order to increase fathers' participation in parental leave (Lammi-Taskula, 2007). In 2000, Iceland, hitherto a laggard in comparison to the other Nordic countries, enacted law on paid parental leave that ensured both parents the same individual entitlements to paid maternity and paternity leave.<sup>1</sup> The stated aim of the 2000 legislation was twofold: to ensure that children enjoy the care of both parents; and to enable both women and men to coordinate family life and work outside the home (Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave no. 95/2000). In other words, the policy defines it as the state's role to actively encourage fathers to participate in the care of their young children by earmarking part of the parental leave for fathers.

The statistics shows that take-up rates of Icelandic fathers are high and that in most cases they are taking three months paid paternity leave. The aim of this paper is to examine the influences of these changes: Are parents dividing paid work and the care of their young children more equally after the 2000 Act came into force, thus reaching its twofold goal?<sup>2</sup>

In order to put the case of Iceland into context, the first section of the paper discusses the development of Icelandic welfare and family policies from a comparative perspective, thus comparing Iceland to the other Nordic countries. The next section

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<sup>1</sup> The Icelandic legislator use the concepts in following way: parental leave is used as an umbrella term that includes all paid leave in connection to child birth (i. *Fæðingarorlof* and the terms maternity and paternity leave refers to the individual entitlements of each parent to 3 months paid parental leave. The paper follows this use of the concepts but most often the concept of parental leave is used in the text.

<sup>2</sup> The data for the policy analysis and the data from the two surveys was collected within the research project *Combining Work and Care: Childcare and Labour Market Participation of Parents of Children under 3* funded by the Iceland Research Fund (*Rannís* – The Icelandic Centre for Research), the Icelandic Equality Fund and the University of Iceland Research and Assistantship Fund. Parts of this paper have been published in a joint project with Ingólfur V. Gíslason, used here with his kind permission. The project was supported by REASSESS, Nordic Centre of Excellence: Reassessing the Nordic Welfare Model and and Iceland Research Fund (*Rannís* – The Icelandic Centre for Research).

discusses the development of Icelandic childcare policies in comparison to the Nordic countries, followed by a section on the 2000 act; its creation and content. The following sections, explores how parents of children born in 1997, before the act on parental leave came into force, organized work and care and compares it with that of children born after the act came into full force, in 2003. The influences of the Act on breastfeeding and fertility rates are also discussed. Finally, the conclusion is presented and the effects of the current economic crisis on the parental leave scheme are discussed in short.

### **Icelandic family and gender equality policies in a Nordic context**

Earlier research has shown that the Icelandic welfare system deviates from the Nordic model on some important aspects. During the 1990's, Iceland's proportion of GNP spent on social affairs hovered around 18%, which is low by Nordic standards and even when compared to the rest of Europe (Ólafsson, 1999). However, during the 2000s the gap between expenditure figures in Iceland and the other Nordic countries has been narrowing, both for total social expenditure and expenditure for families and children.

Table 1. Social expenditure and expenditure on families and children as % of GDP in Nordic countries 2006

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Social expenditure	29.1	26.2	21.2	22.6	30.7
Exp. family and children	3.7	2.9	3.1	2.7	2.9

*Social protection in the Nordic countries 2006/2007, 2008.*

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main economic activity in Iceland was in the primary sector, mostly farming and fishing. In the latter part of the last century, heavy industry was introduced and later Iceland followed the road taken by other western societies with a major expansion of the service and technology sectors. Iceland has enjoyed economic prosperity and living standards have been high. In part, this is due to high levels of labour market participation of men and women, little unemployment and long working hours. In October 2008 this all changed, three of the country's major banks collapsed and were taken over by the state. The Icelandic bank system collapsed, the national currency (*krona*) has fallen sharply in value and a severe economic recession hit Iceland. Unemployment has been around 10% in 2009, emigration has increased both among immigrants and Icelandic citizens and many families have been hit hard. The government made an agreement with the IMF on how to restore the country's economy. After a period of protesting from the people, elections were held and a coalition

government left of centre came into power (Jónsson, 2009). However, there remain many unresolved problems created by the collapsing of the three private banks (See e.g. Joly, 2009). Furthermore, specialists are not in agreement on the depth or the length of the crisis. Thus in light of heavy debts in the public and private sector, welfare expenditure will be reduced heavily over the next years. It remains to be seen how these reductions will affect the benefits and services provided for children and their families in the years to come.

Returning to the history of family policy in Iceland, consideration of family policy grew during the 1990s. Work-life balance gained wide attention from policy makers as well as from the labour unions and employers (Eydal and Ólafsson, 2008; Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). In 1997, *Alþingi* formally recognized the need for explicit public family policy by passing a parliamentary resolution on both the formation of family policy as well as measures to be implemented that would strengthen the position of the family (Eydal and Ólafsson, 2008). The principal premises of the family policy were that the family is the cornerstone of Icelandic society and a source of human values that should be reinforced and protected regardless of structure. Furthermore, it stated that the policy should primarily take the following three principles into account:

- That the welfare of the family is based upon equality between men and women and on shared responsibility for the tasks within it.
- That the family is the setting for emotional ties.
- That family life provides individuals, especially children, with security and the opportunity to fully develop their qualities (*Pingskjal* 1230, 1996-7).

Similarly, there was a growing awareness of gender equality issues at that time. Iceland has participated in the extensive Nordic co-operation on equality policies for decades; i.e. the Nordic Council of Gender Equality, a meeting of ministers of gender equality from each respective Nordic country (Hole, 2006). During the 1970s and 1980s, the Nordic gender-equality project encouraged women's participation in the labour market from which all the countries developed extensive policies, including care policies in order to enable equality (*Kvinnor och män i Norden*, 1988). A growing concern for the rights of children to care from both parents, regardless of parental relationships can also be observed in family law of the Nordic countries (Eydal, 2006; Hatland and Mayhew, 2006). While mothers have increased their participation in paid work the participation of men in housework, including childcare, tended to lag behind (e.g. Finch, 2006; Lewis, 2007).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, all Nordic countries extended their maternity leave schemes to include parental leave (Ellingsæter and Leira, 2006b). However the statistics show that the participation ratio of fathers has been very low in most cases and during the 1990s, all Nordic countries established some form of independent rights for fathers to paternity leave in order to increase fathers' participation in parental leave (Lammi-Taskula, 2007). Despite these relatively generous leave entitlements and the fact that both parents have the opportunity to use them, the statistics show that the participation ratio of fathers remained in most cases very low (e.g. Leira, 1999). This fact, and a growing recognition of the important role of fathers as caregivers, gave rise to attempts to implement new policies designed to encourage increased parental choice and a more active role of fathers when it comes to providing care (Moss and Deven, 1999). Such policy changes were made by all Nordic countries during the 1990s and established the independent right of fathers to paternity leave in order to increase fathers' participation in parental leave (Lammi-Taskula, 2007). In 1993, Norway became the first Nordic country to establish a 'use or lose', paid one-month paternity leave scheme, sometimes referred to as the 'daddy month' (Brandth and Kvande, 2003a). In 2000, Iceland, hitherto a laggard in comparison to the other Nordic countries, followed in the footsteps of Norway and enacted a new law on paid parental leave that ensured both parents the same individual entitlements to paid maternity and paternity leave.

### **Icelandic care policies in a Nordic context**

As stated before, Iceland provided less support to families than the other Nordic countries during the post-war period, but over the past two decades public care support for young children has increased (Eydal and Ólafsson, 2008).

During the 1960s and the 1970s, public day-care became an important issue in the social discourse within Nordic countries. The main reasons were labour shortages and an increased emphasis on women's rights to waged employment on par with men (Sipilä, 1997). However, the policies developed in the Nordic countries emphasized that children should be *entitled* to public day-care in order to *ensure their best interest* (Rauhala, Andersson, Eydal, Ketola and Warming, 1997). All the Nordic countries developed comprehensive legislation on day-care in the 1960s and 1970s and in 1973 the Act on the Creation and Administration of Day-care Institutes (no. 29/1973) came into effect in Iceland (Broddadóttir, Eydal, Hrafnadóttir and Sigurðardóttir, 1997; Sipilä, 1997). However, in comparison to the other Nordic countries, public care support for parents of young children developed at slower rate in the 1970s and 1980s. The volumes

of day care services were lower and Iceland was the last Nordic country to develop a universal scheme of paid parental leave in 1980; giving parents entitlements to 3 months paid parental leave. It gave the mother the opportunity to transfer her entitlements to the father 30 days after parturition. In 1987, this leave was extended to 6 months (Eydal, 2005).

Despite less public support, the Icelandic mothers were as active in the labour market as their Nordic counterparts and the fertility rate was higher than in any other Nordic country (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). Thus, there was a gap between the working hours of mothers and care services. Research from 1980s shows that Icelandic parents used various solutions in order to bridge the gap between the relatively short paid parental leave and public day-care such as irregular working hours, private solutions, most often help from grandparents but also other relatives, friends and neighbours and in some cases even redefinition of children's need for care, including children being cared for by older children (Júlíusdóttir, 1993, 1995; Kristjánsson, 1989; Köhler, 1990).

A new day-care act was passed in 1991 (Pre Schools Act no. 48/1991 and no. 78/1994). From 1990-2008, the Icelandic municipalities increased pre-school volumes, both in regards to the number of children enrolled and the hours attended (Eydal and Ólafsson, 2008).

Table 2. Overview of care support for parents of children 0-5 years old in 2007 in the Nordic countries

	Parental leave no. weeks	Cash for care	Day-care % of age group
Denmark	Total period: 50	No state policies but exists in some municipalities	0-1 years: 17
	-Mother: 18		1-2 years: 90
	-Father: 0		3-5 years: 96
	-Father with mother: 2		0-5 years: 81
Finland	Total period: 44	State program: Cash for care for children under three	0-1 years: 1
	-Mother: 18		1-2 years: 40
	-Father: (2)		3-5 years: 72
	-Father with mother: 3		0-5 years: 49
Iceland	Total period: 39	No state policies, some municipalities have stated cash for care schemes	0-1 years: 7
	-Mother: 13		1-2 years: 80
	-Father: 13		3-5 years: 95
	-Father with mother: 0		0-5 years: 75
Norway	Total period: 53	State program: Cash for care for children under three	0-1 years: 4
	-Mother: 9		1-2 years: 69
	-Father: 10 [From 01.07.09]		3-5 years: 95
	-Father with mother: 2		0-5 years: 71
Sweden	Total period: 69	[From 2008: State law, municipalities decide: Cash for care for children under three]	0-1years: -
	-Mother: 8		1-2 years: 70
	-Father: 8		3-5 years: 97
	-Father with mother: 2		0-5 years: 73

*Social Security in the Nordic Countries 2006/7, 2008; Borgarbörn, 2008; Lag om kommunalt vårdnadsbidrag, 2008:307.*

The table 2 shows that the Icelandic volumes of day-care are among the highest in the Nordic countries and only Denmark provides more care for children under two. The main

explanation for the differences in day-care volumes is, on the one hand, the length of paid parental leave, as is the case in Sweden, and on the other hand, cash for care schemes. Examples of the latter are of importance for both the volumes of day-care for children under three in Finland but also Norway (Ellingsæter, 2006; Salmi, 2006). Thus, the Nordic countries have chosen different paths to enable parents to work and care.

Iceland has moved from being the Nordic country with the least public care support given to parents of young children, to that of being the Nordic country which policies in 2005 clearly support the dual-earner model: with high day-care volumes and increased rights to paid paternal leave resulting in the high volume of fathers utilizing their benefits (e.g. Finch, 2006). However, at the same time it offers less total support than the other countries do, shorter total period of paid parental leave. Hence, the childcare gap, to use the terminology of Ellingsæter (2006), to describe the period from the end of paid parental leave until the child gets day-care service, still exists in Iceland. There is no comprehensive research available on the most recent development in Icelandic child-care policies, cash for care schemes on the local level, but the schemes are quite different in character (Einarsdóttir and Ólafsdóttir, 2007). In Reykjavik, by far the largest municipality, parents can receive cash for care payments if they have applied for pre-school and after the age of two the payments are only paid in cases where pre-school is not available (*Borgarbörn*, 2009).

### **Law on equal rights of mothers and fathers to paid parental leave**

As already mentioned, it was in 2000 that Iceland, hitherto a laggard in comparison to the other Nordic countries, enacted the new piece of law; i.e. the Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave (no. 95/2000), which ensured both parents the same individual entitlements to paid maternity and paternity leave (Eydal, 2008).

The fact that mothers were mainly responsible for the care of young children despite efforts in family policy to ensure that children received the care of both parents, had been discussed as a social problem during the 1990s. Similarly, the failure of the policies on gender equality to create equality between men and women in the labour market was increasingly seen to be a result of the lack of fathers participation in child care and the absence of mothers from the labour market due to child care (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). The statistics of the State Social Security Institute shows that few fathers took paternity leave in the years 1993-1998 or about 0.3% of the number of mothers who received payments (*Staðtölur almannatrygginga*, 2001). This does not reflect a

complete lack of interest or participation in the child's birth and fathers declared their interest in taking a more active role in care of their newborns. In 1997, an opinion poll revealed 87.5% of the men claimed that they would use 3 months paternity leave if it were available and if it did not infringe on the rights of the mother (Gíslason, 1997).

In search for ways to reach the goals of gender equality and the rights of children to care from both parents, the ideas of increasing fathers entitlements to paid parental leave developed, both in the policies of political parties and within the labour movement. On several occasions during the 1990s, the left-wing parties and the Women's Alliance had introduced proposals on the independent rights of fathers for parental leave without success (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the parliamentary elections in 1999, all the parties represented in parliament had changes to the maternity/paternity leave on their agendas and all mentioned increasing the entitlements of fathers in that context (Gíslason, 2007). After the election, the 1995 coalition government renewed its collaboration, thus a coalition of the Independence Party, right-of-centre and the Progressive Party on centre remained in power and on April 28, 2000 the Minister of Social Affairs Páll Pétursson, proposed a new act on maternity/paternity and parental leave (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008).

According to the objectives of the act (Art. 2), it was supposed to guarantee that the child had time with both father and mother, and enable both men and women to participate fully in both family life and employment. The bill stated that the traditional division of labour between mothers and fathers had often resulted in fathers being deprived of opportunities to be with their children. References were made to research showing that a majority of men claimed they wanted to be able to reconcile labour market participation and childcare to a greater extent. It stated that equal and independent rights to maternity/paternity leave plays an essential role in ensuring that both parents have the opportunity to reconcile work and family life (*Þingskjal* 1065, 1999 – 2000). In the bill, reference is made to the Icelandic legislation on gender equality, thus the purpose of the new legislation was both to ensure the rights of children to care from both parents and to increase equality between men and women (Eydal and Ólafsson, 2008). It is, nonetheless, clear from discussions in parliament and in society, that further hopes were attached to these changes. The Minister of Social Affairs mentioned that he hoped this would have the added impact of reducing the gender pay gap, and the chair of the Left-Green Party had similar expectations (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). In the

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<sup>3</sup> For more detailed analysis of the creation of the policy please see Eydal and Gíslason, 2008; Einarsdóttir and Pétursdóttir, 2009.

debates, references were made to different agreements within the EU and that one of the goals of the legislation was to adopt the Directive on Parental Leave (96/34/EC) (*Pingskjal* 1065, 1999 – 2000).

In order to ensure these goals are reached, each parent will, have an independent right to maternity/paternity leave of up to three months due to: a birth, primary adoption or the permanent fostering of a child. This right shall not be assignable. In addition, parents shall have a joint right to three additional months, which may either be taken entirely by one of the parents or else divided between them. The right to maternity/paternity leave shall lapse when the child reaches the age of 18 months [...] A woman shall take maternity leave for no less than the first two weeks after the birth of her child [...] A non-custodial parent shall have the right to maternity/paternity leave providing the custodial parent has agreed that the non-custodial parent is to have access to the child during the period of the maternity/paternity leave (Art. 8, Act of Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave No. 95/2000).

It was explicitly stated that paternity/maternity leave should not be transferable between parents, because by doing so the aim of the law could not be reached (Pétursson, 1999-2000). Furthermore, parents are also entitled to 26 weeks parental leave without payment, 13 weeks are entitled to the mother and 13 weeks are entitled to the fathers. The law came into force in 2001 but the rights of fathers were gradually implemented, fathers had the right to a one-month paternity leave in 2001, two months in 2002 and in 2003 they gained full entitlements to three months.

A certain amount of flexibility was introduced to the system so that an employee could make arrangements with his/her employer to divide the leave into a number of shorter intervals and/or take leave along with working part-time. If an agreement could not be reached, the employee could always take the leave in full. Both parents could be take leave at the same time if they chose (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). The contract between employee and employer remains unchanged during maternity/paternity and parental leaves and cannot be terminated during such leave. The same applies for pregnant women (Act of Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave No. 95/2000). Addressing the Icelandic act, Moss and O'Brien (2006, p. 22) state: "this scheme contains one of the most generous "father-targeted" leave entitlements so far developed in modern economies in terms of both time and economic compensation".

Table 3. Overview of entitlements to maternity/paternity/parental according to the Act

Type of leave/Period	Age of child	Payment
Paternity/Maternity leave: 3 months maternity leave; 3 months paternity leave; 3 months divided as the parents choose Total =39 weeks	0-18 months*	For parents participating in labour market 12 months before birth; 80% of total pay**  For other parents: flat rate payments
Parental leave: 13 weeks for mothers 13 weeks for fathers Total=26 weeks	18 months – 8 years	No payments

Eydal and Gíslason, 2008. \*Age of child changed to three years June 2009. \*\*Roof of payment implemented in 2004.

While on leave, parents active in the labour market are entitled to a monthly payment, which equals 80% of their average income from the previous two years. The 2000 Act stipulated that payments should be equal to 80% of the working parents' average wages -taken from twelve consecutive months, up until two months before the beginning of the maternity/paternity leave- including all forms of wages, with no ceiling or upper limit and universal benefits for non-working parents, but in 2004, a ceiling was implemented.<sup>4</sup> Those outside the labour market, or working less than 25% had the right to a maternity/paternity grant in the same way as parents on maternity/paternity leave. Full time students were also entitled to a fixed amount birth grant, but twice as high an amount as those working less than 25% (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). A specific fund, the Parental Leave Fund (*icl. Fæðingarorlofssjóður*) was set up to finance the payments for maternity/paternity leave. The fund was financed with part of the employers' insurance levy. The financing of the benefits was arranged without anybody experiencing added costs. A part of an insurance levy, already paid by employers now went to the Parental Leave Fund, whereas it had previously been allocated to the unemployment insurance fund. A win-win situation had therefore been created; everybody was better off after the change (Gíslason, 2007).

### How was the act received?

The Icelandic Parliament passed the new act in record time. Discussions lasted for a total of less than four hours and when it came to the final vote no member of parliament

<sup>4</sup> The period on which the compensation was to be calculated has been changed two times: to two years in 2004 and 12 months, ending 6 months before the birth in 2008 (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008).

objected, although one abstained (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). Thus, the original bill was accepted without changes in record time (*Pingskjal* 1310, 1999-2000).

Gallup polls from 2003 show broad support for the act (Gallup, 2003). The act enjoyed a broad base of support from all political parties, as well as from both employers and employees, along with wide acceptance in Icelandic society (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). According to Eydal and Gíslason (2008) the fact that Iceland was a laggard when it came to developing extensive rights to paid parental leave for such a long period seems to be one of the explanatory factors as to why the laws have enjoyed such high general support, since the entitlements of the fathers were an addition to the leave period and the mothers could take the same six months leave.

The ultimate test of the relevance of the legislation is the take-up of fathers and mothers. The statistics from the *Parental Leave Fund Iceland* show that the majority of fathers in Iceland have used their individual entitlements of three months leave. In 2007, 88.5% of the fathers applied for paid parental leave and used on average 101 days. The following table 4, shows the development from 2001, when the act came into effect, until 2007.

Table 4. Mothers' and fathers' uptake of maternity – paternity leave in Iceland, 2001-2007

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Mothers (N)	4054	4070	4167	4291	4302	4444	-
Applications from fathers as % of mothers	82.4%	83.6%	86.6%	89.8%	88.2%	88.6%	88.5%
Average number of days used by fathers	39	68	97	96	99	99	101
Average number of days used by mothers	186	187	183	182	184	185	181
Fathers using more than their basic rights	14.5%	13.9%	16.1%	17.1%	19.5%	19.7%	21.2%
Mothers using more than their basic rights	94.2%	93.4%	90.9%	90.5%	89.7%	90.3%	93.1%
Fathers using less than their basic rights	5.1%	10.1%	14.2%	17.9%	19.5%	18.5%	16.4%
Mothers using less than their basic rights	0.9%	0.8%	1.0%	1.1%	0.1%	0.3%	1.5%
Percentage of fathers taking all of the leave in one package	45.2%	21.2%	17.9%	15.0%	25.8%	25.7%	25.7%

Eydal and Gíslason, 2008; Fæðingarorlofssjóður, n.d.

From 2003 and onward, in general the fathers are using their 3 months entitlement. In a majority of cases, the mother uses more of the joint period than the fathers. In 2006, 19.7% of the fathers used more than their basic rights compared to 90.3% of mothers. While this could be interpreted as success, where one fifth of the Icelandic fathers actually take more than their three months, representation in Icelandic media has not been celebrating the fathers' participation (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). Rather the tone

has been critical with complaining over the lack of equality as seen in headlines like „Fathers are not doing well enough” (Sveinsdóttir, 2007).

When compared to the Nordic countries, Icelandic fathers take a higher share of the total days available in paid parental leave than fathers in the other countries according to the annual calculations from the Nordic Social Statistical Committee. The following table 5, shows how the share of Icelandic fathers has increased since 2001.

Table 5. Nordic countries: Percentage of total number of benefit days used by fathers in the event of pregnancy, childbirth and adoption, 2000-2007

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
2000	5.5	4.1	3.3	7.2	13.7
2001	5.7	4.3	11.5	8.3	15.0
2002	5.5	4.8	19.6	8.6	16.6
2003	5.1	5.3	27.6	8.6	18.3
2004	5.5	5.7	31.8	9.0	19.7
2005	5.9	5.5	32.7	9.3	20.5
2006	6.0	5.7	32.6	10.4	20.9
2007	6.1	6.2	31.2	11.4	21.7

*Social Security in the Nordic Countries 2005, 2007; Social Security in the Nordic Countries 2006/7, 2008; Hatja, 2009.*

Table 5 shows that Nordic fathers are first and foremost using their individual entitlements and that most mothers use the lion's share or all of the joint entitlements. The figures for both Norway, where fathers have had 6 weeks of paid parental leave and Sweden 2 months, are higher than in Denmark and Finland. Furthermore, this is very clear in the case of Iceland; i.e. as the Icelandic fathers' entitlements increases the higher the proportion of total benefit days used by fathers (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). Thus, it is clear that Icelandic fathers use their entitlements, but the question remains if their leave had the effect that the legislator hoped for? In order to estimate the effects of the new Act on Maternity/Paternity and Paternal Leave (no. 95/2000) the research project *Childcare and Labour Market Participation of Parents of Children under 3* was conducted.

The aim of the project was to compare how parents of young children balanced labour participation and childcare before and after the legislation took effect. The data comes from two questionnaire surveys. The first survey was conducted in 2001 among parents that had their first child in 1997. Therefore, their children were three year old when the act came into force. The list was sent to the home addresses of the mothers, drawn from the national registry, and it was left to the parents to decide which one of them completed the survey, in a majority of the cases the mothers were the ones who

completed the questionnaire. This may have led to the role of fathers in caring for their children being underestimated, as surveys where both parents respond indicate that fathers felt that they contribute more than the mothers (see e.g. Seward, Yeatts and Zottarelli, 2002 on this). The Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave (no. 95/2000) came into full effect in 2003 and in spring 2007 a comparable survey was sent to parents who had their first child in 2003.

1551 questionnaires were sent out in 2001, 890 of which were completed and returned. The resulting response rate is therefore just under 57%. The population for the latter survey was similar in size. 1572 questionnaires were sent out (2007-2008), of which 874 were completed and returned (making the response rate 56% for that year). In order to achieve the same response rate as in 2001, respondents in the second survey in 2007-8 were invited to complete the survey online (39% completed the survey online). The response rates are quite acceptable considering how extensive the questionnaire was and the fact that this was a self-completion mail survey.<sup>5</sup> The *University Of Iceland Social Science Research Institute* analysed the non-responses. The analysis revealed that the sample did not deviate significantly from the population.

The main priority was to collect detailed information on how people organized employment and care during the year before the birth of the child and during the first three years of the child's life. There were also questions on conditions at work for both parents, e.g. flexibility and support available to parents and changes in circumstances following childbirth. In addition, there were items on care for the child, how care was divided between parents as well as if other people provided care (such as baby-minders, play-schools, or relatives). Finally, there were conventional background variables such as age, education, incomes, and family circumstances.

### **How did the parents divide their parental leaves?**

The survey included questions on the employment status of parents over a period of four years, starting one year before childbirth and ending three years following. "Parental leave" was among the response options and there was a distinction between full-time and part-time parental leave.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The *Social Science Research Institute* at the University of Iceland was responsible for the data collection, data entry, and reporting of the data for the 2007 survey, but *Capacent Gallup* was responsible for the reporting of the 2001 data. Thanks to all respondents in the survey and all that have worked on the project, special thanks to Jón Karl Árnason, Ásdís Arnalds, Heiður Hrunn Jónsdóttir that assisted with the data for this particular paper.

<sup>6</sup> The second survey also included one response option for unpaid parental leave, which can be up to 12 weeks for either parent according to the 2000 act. Very few parents had availed themselves of that right.

In the first survey, both parents of children born 1997 were asked about uptake of parental leave, though at this point in time only few fathers were entitled to 2 weeks of independent leave. As one would expect a very high proportion of mothers (88.3%) were on parental leave during the first month after childbirth (n=887) and only 0,8% said they were working during the first month. The uptake rates for mothers declined gradually and only 24.3% were on parental leave by the 7th month (15.3% full-time and 9% part-time). Very few fathers took leave, as their individual entitlements were very limited, as has already been noted. Nevertheless, 2.8% (n=820) 13.4% used their summer vacation to stay at home during the first month after the birth.

The mothers' responses in the second survey were very similar to those in the first (n=853). 86.5% were on parental leave during the first month after childbirth and only about 2% were working full-time. The main difference between mothers in the two surveys is that a larger group in the latter survey was on part-time leave (e.g. 21.3% during the first month, compared to 7.2% in the first survey). As was to be expected, there were considerable differences between men in the two surveys. 56.2% of fathers took parental leave during the first month after the child was born. The take-up rates then decline steeply. In the second month, 28% of fathers were on leave, 11.7% during the third month, but then it starts rising again gradually and by the eighth month it was up to 19.4%.

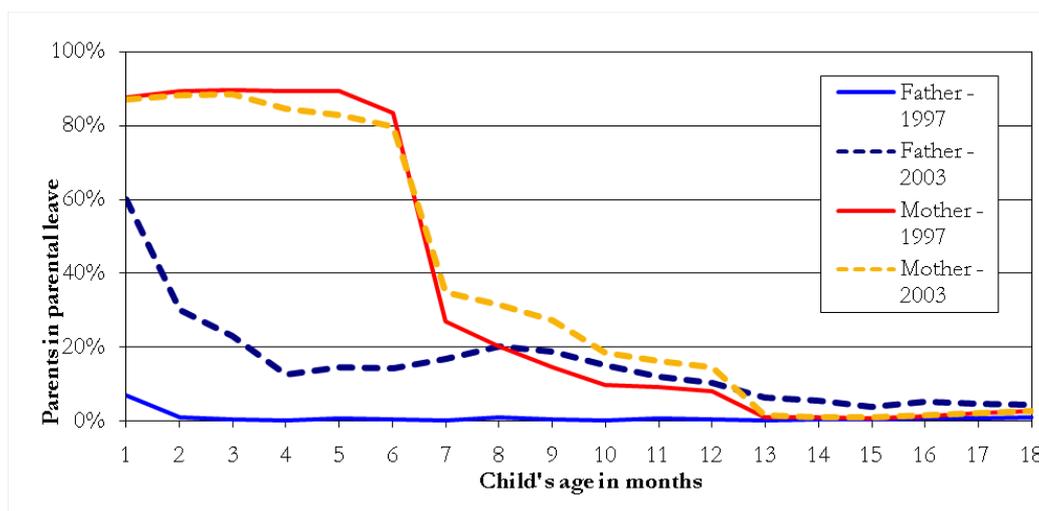


Figure 1. Mothers and fathers of first-borns 1997 and 2003: % on paid parental leave from birth - 18 months

Research from both Iceland and abroad, shows that in most cases parents make use of the parental leave that they are entitled to individually. The difference between mothers and fathers is that the former use most of the shared entitlements that parents can divide among themselves (Brandth and Kvande, 2003a; Bygren and Duvander, 2006;

Social Security in the Nordic Countries 2005, 2007; *Moderne familier-traditionelle valg-en studie av mors og fars uttak af foreldrepermisjon*, 2009). The results are in line with these previous results. In the former survey only a small number of fathers make use of the parental leave but in the latter survey an overwhelming majority of fathers use the leave that they are entitled to individually. On the whole, 82.9% of fathers in the latter survey take some form of parental leave (n=864).

Many fathers go on leave during the first few weeks after birth, a time during which most of the mothers are also on leave. They then take the remainder of their leave once the mother's leave is over. This means that parents use the three joint months of parental leave mainly to extend the mother's leave. These findings are, in general, similar to those that found in other countries. Fathers mainly use their individual entitlements and it is highly unusual for them to use a part of the shared leave time (Armeniaa and Gerstel, 2006; Bruning and Plantenga, 1999; Gíslason, 2007; Leira, 2002). Furthermore, both the results from the survey among fathers of children born 2003, in line with statistics from the Icelandic Social Insurance Institute, show that fathers are more likely than mothers to divide their leaves into a number of shorter spells (Eydal, 2008; Gíslason, 2007). Gíslason agrees with Brandth and Kvande (2003a; 2003b) that when the parental leave of fathers is divided up in shorter spells, the fathers become a kind of reserve carer (see also Pétursdóttir, 2004).

Research in the other Nordic countries has shown that there are considerable differences between various groups of fathers regarding how they use their entitlements. According to Swedish research (Duvander, 2000; Haas, 1992; Näsmann, 1992) there is a positive correlation between the level of education and employment security, and the take-up rate of parental leave for fathers. Duvander and Sundström (2000) point out that the attitudes of Swedish parents towards sharing parental leaves are more positive the higher their levels of education. They also show that fathers who have incomes above the population mean are more likely to take advantage of their parental leave than those that do not. Moreover, fathers who had incomes above the replacement cap had significantly lower take-up rates. It was also more common that parents shared the leave if mothers were only entitled to small amounts (e.g. hadn't been employed for the minimum duration before going on leave). Swedish fathers were also less likely to take parental leave if both parents had a low income. Duvander and Sundström also argue that mothers that are unhappy at work might be more inclined to go on parental leave.

We compared the fathers of children born in 2003 that took paid parental leave to those that did not (864) to see if the groups differed in some way in terms of age, family circumstances, education, employment status, and incomes. The results showed that there was not a significant difference regarding employment status or education. However, there was a significant difference between income groups; i.e. the higher the household income the larger the proportion of fathers who took parental leave, 62% of fathers in the lowest income group took parental leave as opposed to 92% of those in the highest income group, thus in line with the results from the Nordic research noted above. The education and employment status of mothers also resulted in a significant difference in the number of fathers taking paid parental leave also in line with the Nordic results above.

Finally, there was a significant difference in the take up figures between fathers who lived with the mother and those that did not 91% of the former took parental leave as opposed to 52% of the latter. Parents that do not live together have been neglected in research on parental leave (e.g. Kiernan, 2005; 2006; O’Brian, 2007). Furthermore, Good Gingrich (2008) points out that the attention of research on lone parents is mainly aimed at the labour market participation rather than their roles as carers. The fact that lone parent families, in most cases lone mothers, are relatively numerous (19 % of families with children in 2008) in Iceland, it is important to examine the effects that family circumstances have on the uptake of parental leave, keeping in mind the aim of the law is to ensure all children care from both parents (*Landshagir*, 2008).

Table 6. Family status of parents of children born 2003 and fathers take up of paid parental leave, 2006 when the child is three years old

Length of leave	n=85 5	No leave	Less than 3 months	Three months or more
Cohabiting (no changes from birth)	343	7%	12%	81%
Married (no changes from birth)	310	10%	12%	78%
Cohabiting/married after the birth of the child	26	19%	12%	69%
Parents have never lived together	70	73%	3%	24%
Parents have terminated cohabitation or divorced after the birth of the child	106	32%	18%	50%

The table 6 shows that fathers that have never lived with their child have the lowest take up rates (73% no leave) followed by fathers that have ended cohabitation or divorced the mother during the first three years in their child’s life (32%). Fewer fathers who have started cohabiting or married the mother after the birth of the child take paid parental leave compared to fathers that have been living with the with the mother from the birth

of the child. Thus, the parental relationship is of vital importance for the chances of the father to use their entitlements. Very little is known about how parents that do not live together experience the rights to paid parental leave, but a qualitative study among six lone mothers and five lone fathers, conducted in Iceland in 2008 provides some insights to the obstacles and hindrances that these parents experience (Eydal and Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

The parents are faced not only with the task of becoming parents for the first time, but they also have to deal with unsolved issues as previous couples while others did not have any relationship to build on. The study showed that some of the parents have managed quite well with their parental relationship, despite lack of role models and little or no counselling. An example of how innovative the parents were is a couple that had a short relationship, broke up on the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the pregnancy. After they broke up they did not see each other as often and then they decided to sleep together in the same bed one night a week, or as the mother explains:

*My thought was that he would stay close to the womb .... When we broke up it felt as if he was also losing contact with the child and I did not want that to happen, I do not know, maybe this is not the right way to do it, but I was hoping that this would work...*

In other cases, the parents did not manage to make their parental relationship work, which in turn led to the father did or could not use his rights to parental leave.

Table 7. Overview of how the relationship of the parents and their parental involvement

Name	Relationship before birth	Fathers present at the birth	Relationship after birth	Mother's parental leave	Father's parental leave	Father's visiting rights	Custody
Ann	Not good	No	Not good	6 months	None	None	Mother
Bea	Good	No	Not good	6 months	None	None	Mother
Dee	Not good	No	Not good	6 months	None	None	Mother
Elisa	Very good	Yes	Little	6 months	None	Increasing	Mother
Fiona	Not good	No	Not good	6 months	None	None	Mother
Gwen	Very good	Yes	Very good	8 months	3 months	Regular	Mother
Hawk	Not good	No	Good	n.a.	None	Regular	Mother
Ivan	Very good	n.a.	Not good	6 months	3 months	Regular	Mother
John	Very good	Yes	Good	6 months	1 month	Regular	Mother
Kris	Very good	Yes	Very good	None	6 months	Regular	Joint
Steve	Very good	Yes	Good	6 months	None	Regular	Mother

Eydal and Ragnarsdóttir, 2008.

The table 7 provides insights into the varying situation of parents and their children. The fact that many of the children do not have scheduled visiting is in sharp contrast with the Act in Respect of Children, no. 76/2003 which states that it is the right of the child to know and enjoy care from both parents (*Act in Respect of Children no. 76/2003*). The cases where fathers were inactive also point to the fact that fathers that do not live with their children need more than parental leave entitlements to encourage participation in child care, parental counselling and education is also needed if the aim of the act is to be reached for all children regardless of their parents relationship (Eydal and Ragnarsdóttir, 2008).

### **Paid work and parental leave**

The Icelandic labour market has, until the crisis hit in 2008, been characterised by a high activity of both men and women. In 2007, 87.5% of men and 78.6% of women (aged 16 – 74) were active in the labour market. Furthermore, the working hours in Iceland have been exceptionally long and in 1991 men worked on average 51.3 hours a week and women 34.5. In 2007, men were down to 46.9 hours a week and women were up to 35.6 (*Statistics Iceland, n.d*). This also applies to parents of young children as the following table 8 shows.

Table 8. Iceland: Activity rate in the labour market of females and males 25–54 years by children in household, 1991–2001

Year	No children in household	Children in household	Age of youngest child		Number of children	
			0-6	7-15	1 child	2+ children
<b>Females</b>						
Activity rate	90.9	86.5	82.7	91.1	91	83.4
Working hours pr. week	37.5	35.1	33.8	36.5	36.5	33.6
<b>Males</b>						
Activity rate	94.3	97.9	97.7	98.1	97.4	98.3
Working hours pr. week	48.5	52.9	52.3	53.7	52.7	53.0

*Statistics Iceland, Labour Force Survey 2001; see also Eydal, Ólafsson and Sigmarsdóttir, 2003).*

The table 8 shows that having children in the household, in particular children under 7 years of age, as well as having more than one child, reduces the labour market participation of women, while having the opposite effect on fathers. The pattern of working hours is similar to that of the activity rates, women work fewer hours if they have children, in particular when the children are under the age of seven and if there are more than two children in the household. Men are not affected in the same way, as having children results in increase in working hours (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008).

Parents' participation in paid labour is only a crude indicator for the situation of mothers and fathers in the labour market. Still, examining this indicator gives a hint to whether the new act has led to changes. The results show that the gender gap regarding both the number of parents in work and working hours is smaller after the implementation of the act. Figure 2 (below) shows the percentage of mothers and fathers of children born 1997 and 2003 in work the year before the birth of the child and until the child is three.

Both surveys showed that pregnancy had substantial effects on the participation of mothers in paid labour. The former survey showed that 76.4% of mothers (n=887) and 83.7% of fathers (n=820) were engaged in paid labour a year before birth. The proportion of mothers who worked declined gradually till the time of birth. The employment rates of both parents prior to childbirth were quite similar in the latter survey. 84% of fathers (n=799) and 75.6% of mothers (n=853) were engaged in paid labour.

The surveys also reveal an almost identical pattern for employment rates of mothers after childbirth. Very few mothers work during the first three months following childbirth (1% in the former survey and 2% in the latter). Very few mothers of children

born in 1997 had returned to work 6 months after childbirth (7%) but the proportion rose rapidly after that and had reached 62% fifteen months after the child was born. At the end of the study period, 36 months after childbirth, some 61% of mothers were in paid employment. The proportions were similar for mothers of children born in 2003. 22% of mothers had returned to paid work by the time the child reached seven months of age. When the children had reached the age of 10 months approximately 42% were working and the proportion was up to 62% 15 months after childbirth. The post-birth employment rates of mothers do not return to their pre-birth rates during the study period, as can be seen from figure two.

64% of fathers of children born 1997 worked during the first month after childbirth (n=820) but the proportion had returned to its pre-birth level already during the second month after the child was born (or about 83%). On average, 77% of fathers were working during the first three months following childbirth. In the latter survey, there are considerable changes among fathers relative to the first survey. The proportion of fathers who are employed fell to 31% between the surveys. Three months after the child was born the proportion had risen back to 68% and rises gradually thereafter. One year after childbirth, the proportion was up to 84%; i.e. pre-birth levels.

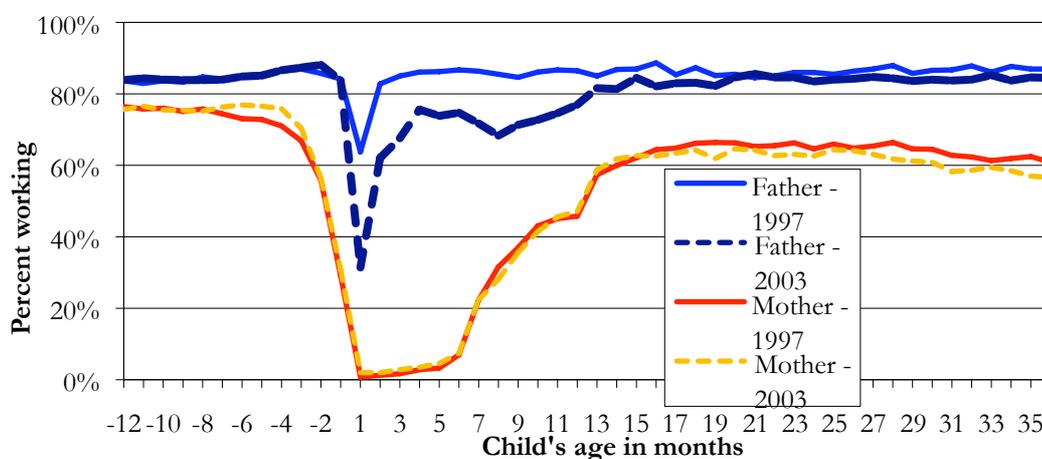


Figure 2. Percent of parents of firstborns 1997 and 2003 in work, a year before birth and until the child is three years old

It is clear that the gap between fathers and mothers is smaller in the latter survey than in the first one, as could be expected given the increase in uptake of paid parental leave among fathers. In the first survey, the employment rates of fathers return to pre-birth levels 1-2 months after the child is born. In the second survey, this does not happen until 13-15 months after childbirth.

When considering the proportion of mothers who engage in paid work it is important to remember that many mothers withdraw from the labour market a second time because of a second child. Considering only mothers that did not have a second child during the period (only one child in 1997) covered by the first survey, the proportion of working mothers reached the same level as 5 months prior to childbirth only some 2 years after the birth (approximately 70%). The results are quite similar in the second survey. The rates of mothers in work for the same group (only one child in 2003) in the latter study reached 70% some 25 months after they gave birth and is fairly stable at that rate for the remainder of the study.

With regards to the employment status of parents, it is worth noting that a sizable proportion of respondents were students. 10% of mothers and 11% of fathers were students in the month following childbirth in the first survey, and 10% of fathers and 8% of mothers in the second survey. The proportion rises gradually as the children mature. When the children in the first survey reached the age of two, 17.4% of mothers and 9% of fathers were studying, compared with 18% of mothers and 7% of fathers in the latter survey. The Icelandic welfare state does provide incentives for students to have children, as students are entitled to paid parental leaves and child supplements to their student loans in addition to subsidized day-care (Björnberg, Ólafsson and Eydal, 2006). Thus, at any given time, there are very few parents that aren't either students or employed during the period under study.

Here, it is important to recall that the employment rates of Icelandic women (and mothers) are among the highest in the OECD, or approximately 80% (op. cit.). It is clear that although the gap between men and women has been diminishing, childbirth still has a greater impact on women's employment rates. The European Union has adopted the objective that women's labour market participation in all the membership countries will reach 60% by 2010. This goal has long since been reached in Iceland (Gíslason, 2006; Périvier and O'Dorchai, 2003). The Icelandic government did not establish any such goals in absolute numbers when the laws of parental leave were passed, but it is clear that they have had the effect of reducing the gap between mothers and fathers in this sense.

### **Working-hours**

The proportion of working parents gives certain indications but the number of work-hours is no less important. The first survey showed that the number of hours worked was higher among fathers than among mothers, both prior to and following childbirth.

The pattern is similar in the latter survey, but a comparison of the results shows that fathers are in general working fewer hours in the latter survey and mothers are working more hours after the birth, as can be seen in figure three. It is interesting that of those fathers of children born 1997 who worked during the three months following childbirth some 82% worked more than 40 hours per week and 40% of those worked 51 hours or more. In the latter survey at the same point in time three months after the childbirth, 75% of fathers worked 40 hours per week or more and of those some 34% worked more than 51 hours. The mean hours of mothers' work in the first survey (children born 1997) were around 41.6 hours per week during the 12 months prior to childbirth and 34.8 hours per week three years after childbirth. In the second survey (children born 2003) these numbers were 40.1 hours and 36.7 hours of average, respectively. The working hours of fathers have also changed between the two surveys. Fathers of children born 1997 worked 48.2 hours pr. week at 12 months and 48.4 when the child was three years old. The fathers of children born in 2003 worked 46.0 and 46.7 hours at same point in time.

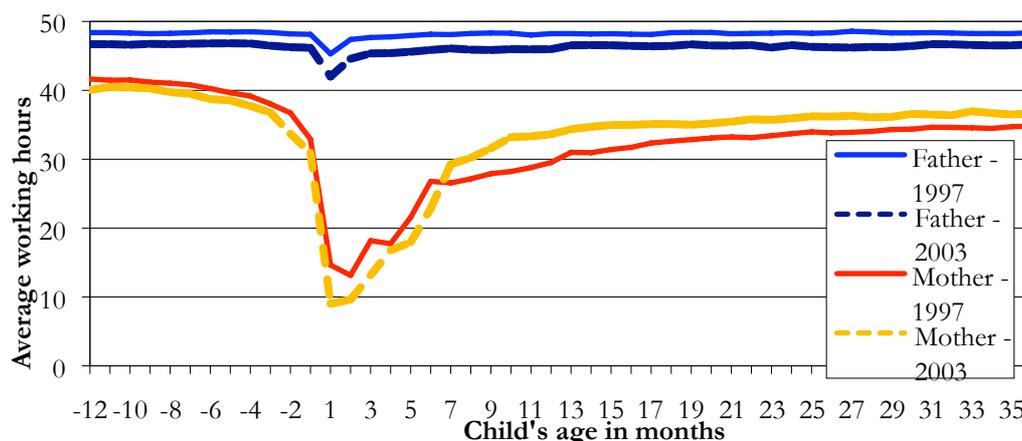


Figure 3. Number of working hours of parents of firstborns 1997 and 2003 in work, a year before birth and until the child is three years old

The results show that the difference between the hours that mothers and fathers work per week when the child is three years old has declined. In the former survey, it was 13.6 hours but in the latter it was down to 10 hours. While this is in line with general trends in the labour market, where men's working hours have been falling and women's hours have been rising, the trend in this data is far more pronounced than that shown by general labour market surveys. Gíslason (2006) has shown that the difference between men's and women's working hours has declined from 16.8 hours in 1991 to 12.2 hours in 2005, or more than four and a half hours over a fifteen year

period. Figure three shows that the trends in the data are similar in magnitude but they occur over a shorter period of time (3.6 hours in 6 years). The changes between the two surveys are in line with the goals of the legislation; i.e. reduced gender gap in working hours. Despite these changes it is clear that parents of young children continue to have long work hours.

But how do parents organize the care for their children? The following section covers how parents from both surveys divided childcare between them.

### **Care from both parents?**

Respondents were asked to describe how they divided child care between them both night and day for every month from the time the child was born and until it was three years old.<sup>7</sup> Day time care for children born 1997 fell to the mother in 89% of all cases (n=879) and it was evenly divided between the parents in little over 10% of cases. The involvement of fathers fell from the second month onward and during the first six months it was almost always the mother that cared for the child (94%). Thereafter, the division of care grows more even, as the child grows older. During the next six months (child aged 7-12 months) the proportion of those that divided the care equally grew (to 19% of all cases). During the first year this proportion was 12% on average. During the second year it rose to 29%, and during the third year it reached 34% on average. The proportion of fathers who were primary caregivers was negligible for the whole period under study (ranging from 0.3% to 2.4%; see figure 4).

The figure of daytime care changed considerably between surveys. Children born in 2003 received more care from their fathers than those born in 1997. The mother was the primary caregiver in 66% of cases during the first month but it was evenly divided in 34% of cases. The proportion of children being cared for by both parents falls gradually after the first month, a pattern similar to that in the earlier survey, and reaches a low point when the children are six months old (15%, which is still 50% more than the earlier survey). As in the earlier survey, the proportion of shared caring grows steadily after the sixth month and towards the end of the period (month 33) there are as many children who receive care from both parents as the number of children who receive care primarily from their mother. The proportion of children for whom the fathers are primary caregivers is still quite low, but there has been an increase between the two

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<sup>7</sup> The question was. How was the child's care at home divided between the parents the first 36 months during the day and the night? There were five options of answers: Mother/father cared completely or mostly for the child, care was divided equally between the parents. For this table, care mostly and completely is combined.

surveys. It peaks at 8,1% when the children are 9 months old, as can be seen in figure four, which is a considerable increase over the numbers in the earlier survey.

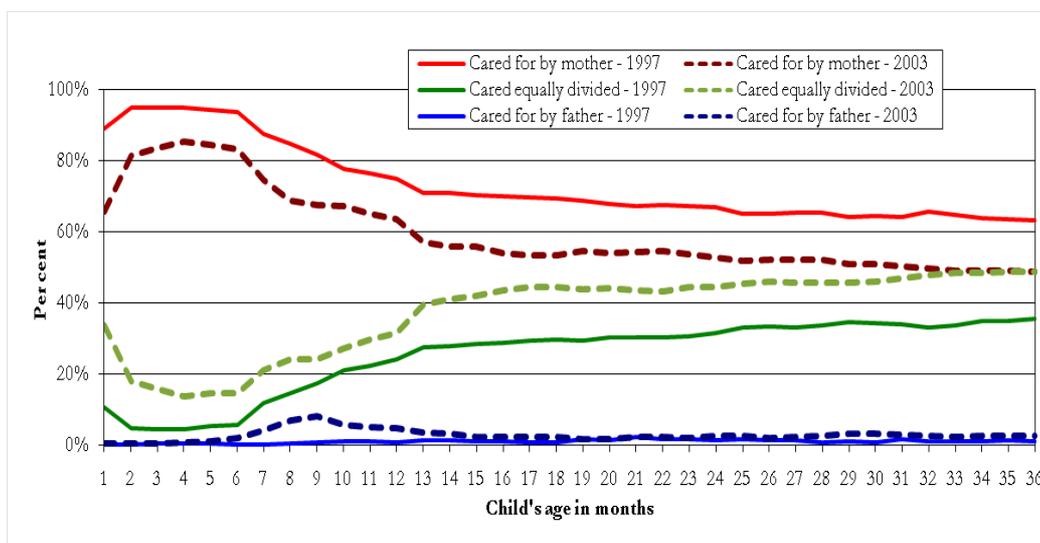


Figure 4. How did parents of firstborns 1997 and 2003 divide daytime care from birth until the age of three?

The figure above shows that the share of care shouldered by fathers rises considerably after the parental leave act was passed. It should be kept in mind, however, that this figure shows all parents asked. There was, however, a sizable group that did not take parental leave and did not live with their children or who did not share custody with the mother, as was noted above. A comparable figure reflecting only those parents who lived together would show a similar trend but the change would start much sooner. When the children are 15 months old the group that enjoys care from both parents had become larger than the one for whom the mothers were primary caregivers.

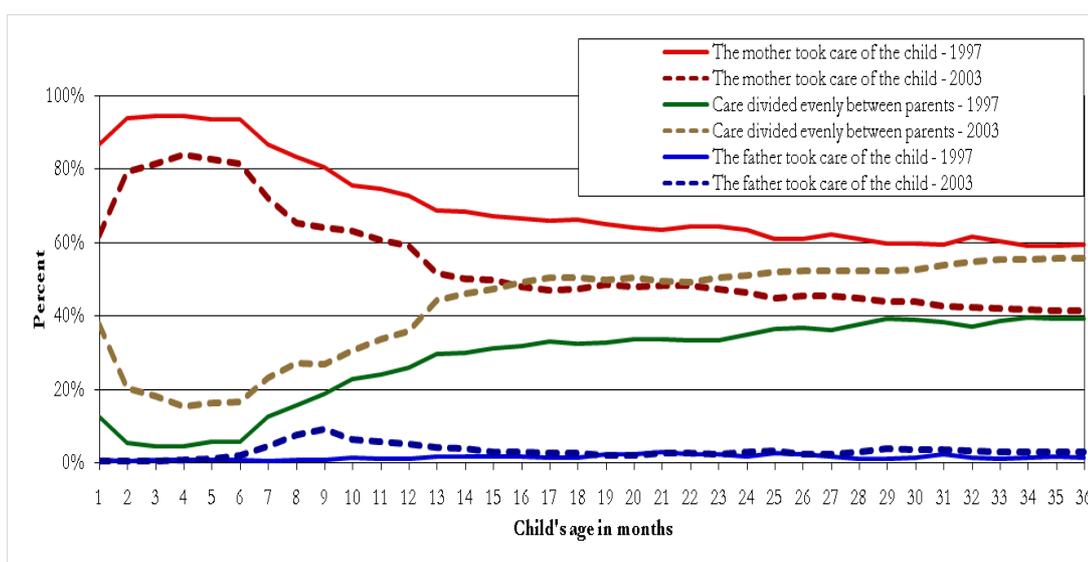


Figure 5. How did cohabiting and married parents of firstborns 1997 and 2003 divide daytime care from birth until the age of three?

The results of the analysis of night-time care for the same group of parents, two parent families are quite similar. The contribution of care from the fathers shows a similar growth-pattern as that for daytime care, but the care at night is more equally shared compared to daytime care in both surveys. The figure below shows how parents divided care during the night.

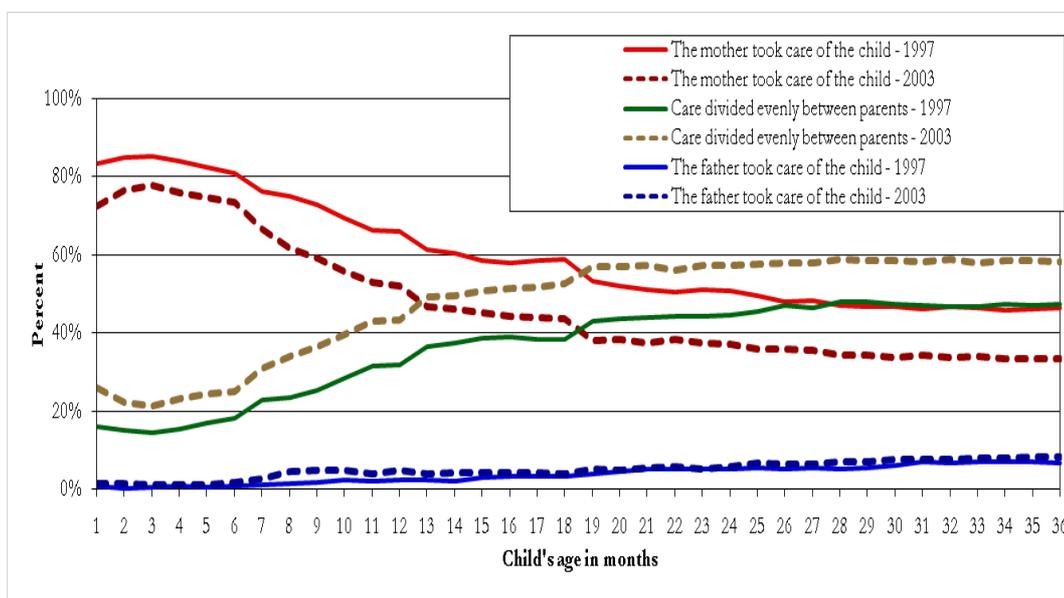


Figure 6. How did cohabiting and married parents of firstborns 1997 and 2003 divided care during the night-time from birth until the age of three?

The pattern in this figure is very similar to that shown in the preceding figures, though it should be noted that the parents from the second survey start sharing care at night earlier than they do during the day, or by the twelfth month compared to the fifteenth. If the analysis for the latter survey would be based on all parents that responded to the survey then this change would occur when the child is around 18 months old. By that time, 49% of parents divide night-time care equally. When the children born 2003 reach the age of three 58.2% of parents divide night-time care equally, while the mother is the primary caregiver in 33.6% of cases. This is a considerable change from the earlier survey, in which mothers remained primary caregivers at night throughout the study period. By the end of the period the mothers were primary caregivers in 52.4% of cases and parents shared night-time care in 42.3% of cases.

It is also of interest to consider whether the extent to which fathers make use of their parental leave is related to their contribution of care for their children. O'Brien (2007, p. 376) points out that the rule has been that if given the opportunity to take part in care for their newborns, fathers will tend to be more involved in their children's care

in the future. Swedish studies in the 1990s showed that fathers that took parental leave were more likely to share the general responsibility for childcare with the mothers than fathers who did not take a leave (e.g. Haas, 1992); more recent studies have also supported these results. Hook (2006) compared data on men's unpaid work from 44 studies on how people spend their time in 20 countries spanning from 1965-2003 and concludes that shared care increases in accordance with women's employment hours, length of parental leave and men's eligibility to take parental leave.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Tanaka and Waldfogel (2007) addressed the issue and used data from the UK Millennium Study cohort of children age 8-12 months (n. 18.819 babies) and their results show that there is a significant difference between fathers that do and do not take parental leave regarding their involvement in the care of their children. The fathers that take parental leave are more involved in three out four types of care activities examined. Similar results were obtained for fathers in the United States. Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (2007) used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study- Birth Cohort, a panel study of over 10.000 children born in 2001, in order to investigate father's involvement in care. From that sample, they used answers from 7.241 fathers that were working during the period in question and living with the children in two-parent families. They conclude that the fathers that take at least two weeks off from work are more involved in their children's care nine months after the birth than fathers that take less time off.

In light of these results, it is interesting to see if there was a relation between the Icelandic fathers take up ratios and their involvement in care during the first three years. The results show that there is a significant difference between the involvement of fathers in the daily care of their children depending on how long paid parental leave they take. The fathers were divided into four groups: those who did not take parental leave (n=147), those who took less than three months (n=105), three months (n=368), and more than three months (n=244), then their participation in child care was calculated.

The results can be seen in the figure below. It shows that the proportion of care provided by mothers is largest when the fathers do not take any parental leave and smallest when the fathers take three months or more of parental leave.

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<sup>8</sup> Iceland was not included in the study.

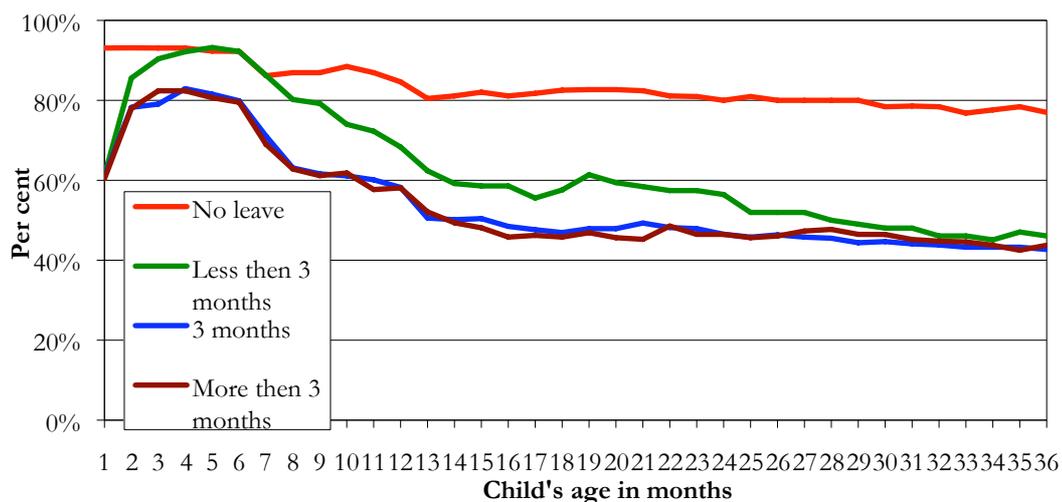


Figure 7. Proportion of mothers of firstborns 2003 that are the primary care-providers during the day from birth until the age of three - sorted by the length of father's parental leave

The difference between the groups was statistically significant throughout the study period; i.e. not only for the duration of the parental leave. Mothers are primary caregivers of children by the age of three in 77% of cases when the father did not take parental leave but only in 43.8% of cases where fathers were on leave for at least three months. The results for care at night were similar.

While the statistical patterns are quite clear, they require careful interpretation as it is quite likely that they are in part the product of a selection effect where fathers that want to prioritize their children and who want to spend more time with their children are also more likely to take longer parental leaves. As O'Brian, Brandth and Kvande points out (2007, p. 382) "Leave taking cannot be viewed in isolation or in purely quantitative terms as it is embedded in a complex web of parenting styles parental work practices, infant behaviour and wider socioeconomic factors..." Mindful of this caveat, it nevertheless seems safe to conclude that parental leave, in interaction with other factors, increases the probability that fathers provide as much care as mothers, even after the parental leave is over. It would be interesting to gather further data on the two samples and attempt to measure the respective contribution of care by both parents e.g. at the age of twelve. It would also be interesting to examine the gender-role attitudes and attitudes towards gender equality of both parents and children in order to gain further understanding of the interplay of values and daily habits of the parents in question.

### Parental leave and timing of breastfeeding

Deven and Carrette, (2004, p. 11) point out that while children are important stakeholders, “an explicit child perspective is a common omission in related research and policy. Moreover, statistical data rarely take the child as a unit of analysis.” However, the importance of parental leave policies for children’s health and wellbeing is well documented (e.g. Kamerman, 2006; Tanaka, 2005). One of the factors influencing children’s health and other outcomes is the length of breast-feeding. The World Health Organization recommends 6 months exclusive breast-feeding and continuation up to two years of age (World Health Organization 2002 in Galtry and Callister, 2005). The recommendations of the Icelandic health care authorities are similar (Aradóttir, 2004; Ívarsdóttir and Bachmann, n.d.).

There is a lack of recent research about breast-feeding in Iceland but *Miðstöð heilsuverndar barna* (Gunnlaugsson, 2005) conducted a research on the length of breast-feeding periods for children born 1999 - 2002. The results show that at the age of 6 months 65% of the children were breast-fed but 89% received other food as well.<sup>9</sup>

Table 10. Breastfeeding: children born in Iceland 1999-2002 % of children breastfed at the age of one week, two, four, six, eight and 12 months

Age of child	n	% only breast feeding	% breast feeding
1 week	1210	92.8	97.2
4 months	1185	46.0	78.4
6 months	1180	13.1	65.8
12 months	1157	0.2	15.6

Figures from Gunnlaugsson, 2005.

Unfortunately, the question about the length of breast-feeding was only asked in the latter survey among parents of children born in 2003. The parents were asked how many months the child had been breast-fed.

<sup>9</sup> All health care centres were asked to collect information about length of breastfeeding and data was collected on 62% of the children.

Table 11. Breastfeeding: First born 2003, length of breastfeeding period

	n	%
Less than month	12	1.4
1 month	39	4.7
2 months	42	5.1
3 months	51	6.1
4 months	38	4.6
5 months	38	4.6
6 months	88	10.6
7 months	64	7.7
8 months	90	10.8
9 months	100	12.0
10 months	57	6.9
11 months	43	5.2
12 months	61	7.3
13 months	23	2.8
14 months	25	3.0
Longer than 14 months	59	7.1
Total	830	100

It is interesting that a large majority of children are breast-fed for more than six months (74.3%), which is somewhat higher than the proportion found by Gunnlaugsson (65% of children were still being breast-fed when they were six months old in his study). We can only speculate about why the length of the breast-feeding period seems to have increased after the law came into force, but one possible explanation might be that the opportunity for parents to be on parental leave together during the first month after birth, and the increased flexibility that they enjoy, somehow facilitates breast-feeding. The different design of the studies, the fact that Gunnlaugsson included all mothers whereas only mothers that were having their first child were included in the present study, which means that the results are not comparable. Nevertheless, it seems safe to conclude that the changes of the parental leave schemes have not resulted in a shorter breast-feeding period, and if anything there is an increase between the studies above.

Comparative studies have shown a relationship between the length of the paid parental leave and duration of breast feeding; e.g. Galtry (2003) found out that at the age of six months 29 per cent of American mothers and 28 per cent of British mothers

breast-fed, compared to 73 per cent of Swedish mothers.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in light of these results, Icelandic mothers are doing very well, since their total rights to paid parental leave are quite lower than Swedish mothers.

A number of studies have found an association between length of leave after childbirth and the duration of time off, and breast-feeding duration, thus, the longer the leave the longer the breast-feeding period (e.g. Baker and Milligan, 2008; Berger, Hill and Waldfogel, 2005; Galtry and Callister, 2005). When the length of breast-feeding of Icelandic children born in 2003 is examined in light of when their mothers started to work the conclusion is that the length of leave did not appear to have an impact on how long the children were breast-fed. The following table shows the length of breast-feeding and the timing of the mother's, of first born in Iceland 2003, return to paid work. There was no significant difference between the groups.

Table 12. Mothers of firstborns 2003: Time of returning to work and the length of breastfeeding

When does the mother return to paid work?	Length of breastfeeding
1-8 months (n=147)	7.5 months
9-12 months (n=172)	7.9 months
13-15 months (n=190)	8.7 months
16-18 months (n=63)	8.6 months
19-36 months (n=172)	8.3 months

There was no significant difference between mothers that started to work and those who did not and neither were there any differences between mothers working full-time or part-time. Thus, for this group of mothers, the length of absence from labour market did not influence the length of the breast-feeding period. These results are not in line with the studies mentioned above (e.g. Berger et al., 2005; Galtry et al., 2005); the Icelandic results seem to challenge existing theories. Given the high importance that health authorities put on breastfeeding for at least 6 months, not only in Iceland but also internationally, it is important to study further how Icelandic mothers manage to combine breast-feeding and active labour market participation.

### **Fertility rates**

According to Garðarsdóttir (2008), there was a slow decline in fertility levels until the turn of the century but from 2001 there has been a slow increase in total fertility levels. She states, "Whether the recent improvements in parental law will uphold this trend

<sup>10</sup> Galtry (2003) points out that socio-cultural support and labour market/health/early childhood policies are important if a country wants to reach high rates of both breastfeeding and women's employment.

remains an open question ... If we are to believe recent research on the importance of father's involvement in child-rearing for continued childbearing the Icelandic legislation is likely to uphold high fertility levels in Iceland" (2008:61). In 2008, the fertility rates were 2.14 and it was the first time since 1996 that the fertility rate was above 2.1 (*Hagstofa*, 2009). The National Hospital has reported that the number of births will be higher in 2009 than in 2008, thus the economical crisis has not yet set its mark on the fertility rates in Iceland and some even question if it might lead to further increase rather than decrease.

### **Conclusions**

This paper analysed the effects of the new Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave by comparing how parents of young children balanced labour market participation and the care of their children before and after the legislation took effect. The analysis was mainly based on results from two surveys conducted among all parents of firstborns in 1997 and 2003.

The overall conclusion of the study is that parents are dividing paid work and the care of their young children more equally after the law came into effect, thus the development is towards the twofold goal of the law on paid parental leave from 2000. The results show that the gender gap regarding both the number of parents in work and working hours is smaller after the implementation of the law. The number of fathers in work is lower after birth in the latter study while the number of mothers remained similar in both studies. Also, the gap in working hours between parents is smaller during the first three years after birth, thus mothers increased their number of working hours between studies. Once the child has reached the age of three the gap between the parents in work-hours has narrowed between the two studies by four hours, from 13 hours to 9 hours. While this is in line with the general trend in the labour market, the change among parents is relatively larger.

The care of the child during both day and night is also divided more equally among the parents after the law act came into force. More fathers are actively engaged in their children's care and not only during their leave taking periods, but also until the child reaches the age of three. Furthermore, the fathers that do take parental leave are significantly more involved in their children's care than fathers that do not take a leave. Furthermore, results on length of breast-feeding showed that 74,.3% of children born in 2003 are breast-fed for 6 months or more and that neither their mothers' return to the

labour market nor the timing of the return did effect the length of the breast-feeding period.

Thus, the results of the study presented here as well as others conducted in order to estimate the effects of the law, indicate that the development is towards the twofold goal of the Act (Stefánsson, Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). Furthermore, fertility rates have increased from 2001 and predictions are that in 2009 the fertility rates will increase from 2.14 in 2008.

Despite such positive results from research and the general support that the Icelandic scheme of paid parental leave has enjoyed it is now under threat. The coalition that came into power in 2007 said in its policy declaration that it intended to extend the maternity/paternity leave in phases and the discussions prior to the election centred around total period of 12 months (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). In December 2008, this same government was forced to propose reductions in social expenditures including the amounts paid to parents in parental leave and the ceiling of payments was reduced from 480.000 ISK to 400.000 (*Pingskjal* 375, 2008-2009). A new coalition, left of centre, proposed a similar bill in June 2009, suggesting further reductions to the ceiling from 400.000 to 350.000 ISK. The report attached to the bill emphasised that this change was made in light of the serious situation of the government deficit and this would be changed back as soon as possible. Furthermore the length of the period that parents could take out their entitlements was extended from one and half year to the three. (*Pingskjal* 155, 2009). Thus, neither government made changes in the length of the leave or the division between parents; keeping in mind the wide support that the act has enjoyed it is difficult to argue that it will be changed in character. However, so many unimaginable things have happened in Iceland over last year and it is impossible to predict in any details what the future holds for the Icelandic welfare system, including the parental leave scheme. The ruling government has emphasised the welfare of families with children and both welfare and gender equality watches have been established, but the depth and the length of the crisis as well as the size of the state deficit will inevitably determine the size of the cuts in social expenditure in the near years to come.

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