



# Exchange of good practices on gender equality

The role of men in  
gender equality  
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# Men and gender equality in the United Kingdom

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## 1. Introduction: The UK Policy Context

### 1.1 General context

The United Kingdom had a Labour government between 1997 and 2010, and since then has been governed by a Coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. 'New Labour' was committed to ambitious social programmes, including a 'joined-up' family policy. Although the Coalition government cut public spending and many of Labour's programmes, there has been a degree of continuity in many areas, one of them being a commitment to gender equality.

Another key factor in the policy context has been the devolution of powers to the four nations of the United Kingdom. Although the devolved authorities of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland exercise differing degrees of autonomy, they have enjoyed some freedom to develop distinctive social policies. Most notably, the Scottish government has pursued a more interventionist approach to family policy.

### 1.2 Fathers and parental leave

Fathers in the UK are currently entitled to one or two weeks' paid Ordinary Paternity Leave and up to 26 weeks' Additional Paternity Leave. However, from 1 December 2014 there will be a new right to Shared Parental Leave enabling mothers and fathers to choose how to share time off work after their child is born. The aim is to facilitate shared parenting and to encourage women to return to the workforce.

Research in 2013 by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) found that less than 1% of fathers take advantage of additional paternity leave and the new reforms are designed to address this. However the new measures have been described as 'transferable maternity leave' and there is no specific addition to paternity leave.

### 1.3 Men in primary school teaching

According to the General Council for Teaching in England, one in four primary schools has no male teacher, despite the number of men qualifying rising by 2.4 per cent since 2008. The overall pattern is similar in Wales, while in Scotland only 8% of primary school teachers are male, rising to 15% in Northern Ireland. There have been a number of recent initiatives to encourage men to enter primary teaching (<http://www.teachingtimes.com/news/primary-schools-male-teachers.htm>).

## 1.4 Men working in childcare

The Coalition government has stated that it wants to achieve ‘a greater gender balance in the early years workforce.’ Despite this aim, and initiatives to increase the number of men working in childcare, the figures for the UK have scarcely risen in recent years. In 2003, 1% of the childcare workforce was male, and in 2010 men represented 2% of daycare staff and 1% of childminders (Groucutt, 2012).

## 2. Policy Debate

### 2.1 Fathers

#### 2.1.2 Fathers and childcare

Fathers’ involvement in the care of their children has increased substantially in the UK in the past twenty years or so. Research presents a complicated picture of how fathers and mothers divide their time with their children, but studies show that on average, fathers of children under 5 spent 1 hour and 20 minutes a day on childcare activities during the week and 2 hours and 30 minutes a day at weekends.

There has been a major shift in social attitudes surrounding fathers and childcare in a generation. Even fifteen years ago, when the present author’s children were young, it was unusual to see men collecting children from nursery or school, and ‘stay-at-home dads’ were a rarity. Now, both are increasingly common. A report this year from the Office for National Statistics claimed that men now make up nearly 10 per cent of those who care for children while their partner goes out to work. There were 227,000 men staying at home to look after children in 2013, a rise of 19,000 compared to the same period in 2011 and the highest increase since figures began in 1993 ([www.ons.gov.uk](http://www.ons.gov.uk)). At the same time, men’s participation in family life is still hindered by a culture of long working hours, when compared to other European countries. According to one report, more than half of UK fathers work more than a 40-hour week, including 30 per cent who routinely exceed the 48 hours a week limit set by the EU Working Time Directive (Dex, 2003).

#### 2.1.3 Support for fathers

The past two decades have witnessed a significant expansion of the support offered to fathers, and the establishment of a number of agencies promoting men’s involvement in the care of their children, the most prominent being the Fatherhood Institute. The same period has seen an increase in the number of local groups and networks supporting ‘stay-at-home’ dads and lone fathers.

There has also been a shift in attitudes towards fathers by policy-makers and professionals, and a growing awareness of the need to encourage men’s involvement in the care of their children. Whereas support services for parents used to focus exclusively on mothers – describing daycare provision as ‘mother and toddler’ groups, for example – and were often unwelcoming to fathers, increasingly family centres and children’s centres take steps to encourage the involvement of fathers and even organise specific sessions, events and classes for fathers.

A range of recent government policies now requires services to engage with fathers specifically. However, some services, and some parts of the United Kingdom, are more responsive than others. An example of good practice might be Scotland's National Parenting Strategy 2012, which requires all policies to be 'dad-friendly'.

#### **2.1.4 Fathers' rights**

On a rather different note, the issue of men and their children has frequently been debated in the UK in the context of fathers' rights, specifically in relation to contact with children following separation and divorce. A number of campaigning groups have sprung up, often participating in high-profile protests, the most spectacular being by the organisation Fathers for Justice (F4J). More moderate groups, such as Families Need Fathers, have also been active in seeking reforms to family law. These groups seem motivated by a genuine concern to encourage men's participation in childcare, rather than being explicitly anti-women.

#### **2.1.5 Absent fathers**

Much of the recent debate in the UK around fatherhood has focused on the issue of absent fathers. For example, in 2013 the Centre for Social Justice released a report claiming that a million children in the UK were growing up without a father, and that the number of lone parent families was increasing at the rate of 20,000 per year. The report argued that many British towns and cities were becoming 'men deserts', with damaging consequences for children's development (Centre for Social Justice, 2013). The CSJ report prompted lively debate among commentators. Some took issue with the definition of 'absence', arguing that many fathers maintain contact with their children despite physical absence from the home. Others questioned whether father absence could be blamed, as the report seemed to do, for a range of social problems, without attending to wider structural issues in poor communities.

## **2.2 Men working in childcare**

In the United Kingdom, as in other European countries, paid care for young children has traditionally been regarded as 'women's work' and the numbers of men working in early years childcare has been low. However, the past two decades have seen a range of initiatives to encourage men to work in these settings. Most of these have been at the non-governmental level, for example the work of groups such as Men in Childcare, based in Scotland, has done much to raise the profile of this issue, and to encourage, train and support men to work with young children.

The debate around men in childcare in the UK has been informed by a number of arguments. At a practical level, it has been argued that recruiting more men to work in childcare will raise the status, and the remuneration, of an undervalued and underpaid area of work. More importantly, campaigners claim that male childcare workers provide role models for children, and particularly for boys, of caring masculinity. This will have a positive impact on the development of the next generation, and contribute to promoting gender equality more widely.

It should be pointed out, however, that campaigns for an increase in male childcare workers have been criticised from a feminist perspective (Robb, 2010). Some have argued that men who move into female-dominated professions tend to take them

over, dominating management roles, while others have questioned the claim that men have a specific contribution to make to childcare (Robb, 2001).

### **2.3 Men in primary schools**

Recent years have seen a growing concern about the apparent decline in the number of men working in primary education. Although the profession has always had a much higher proportion of women than men, there has always been a substantial minority of male teachers. Some research studies have questioned the assumption that the gender of the teacher makes a difference to boys' educational performance (Martino, 2008). The present author's current research is examining this question in relation to work with boys in welfare settings (Tarrant et al, forthcoming).

Some of the arguments for increasing the number of men working in primary schools risk falling back on traditional gender stereotypes. There is an assumption that boys need positive male role models in order to inculcate discipline and to facilitate the development of a 'normal' adult masculine identity. Such assumptions can be seen to lie behind UK initiatives such as 'Troops to Teachers', which aims to recruit former soldiers to work in schools.

One of the factors often noted as contributing to the decline of men working in schools or in childcare is the discourse of risk surrounding men in relation to children. Traditionally, as many commentators have noted, men have been deterred from involvement in the care of children because of its associations with effeminacy and even homosexuality. However, in recent years, the higher profile of child sexual abuse has created the additional risk that men who choose to work with children will be suspected of paedophile tendencies. In the UK, this discourse of risk has been heightened by a number of high profile child sexual abuse cases involving male celebrities, following in the wake of revelations about the late DJ and broadcaster Jimmy Savile.

### **2.4 The 'problem' of boys**

Much of the recent debate around men and gender equality in the UK has focused on the so-called 'problem' of boys. Politicians and commentators have expressed concern about issues such as boys' educational under-achievement, an increase in mental health problems, and the perennial issue of youth crime and anti-social behaviour. As already noted, an increasingly popular explanation for the poor outcomes experienced by boys has been an absence of positive male role models in young men's lives. A striking example of this was Prime Minister David Cameron's speech after the riots in London in August 2011, but this 'male role model' discourse has been echoed in speeches by figures from across the political spectrum.

Concern has often focused on working-class and black and minority ethnic (BME) young men and has led to a range of initiatives, under both the last Labour government and the current Coalition government. Labour initiatives included the REACH programme, which involved using male mentors to raise the attainment of black boys, while the more recent 'Troops to Teachers' initiative, mentioned above, can be seen as drawing on similar assumptions.

The 'male role model' discourse is open to criticism on a number of levels. Firstly, there is a lack of research evidence to support the claim that the absence of adult male influence is a key factor in the range of problems experienced by young men. Secondly, there is no evidence that simply reinforcing male influence will solve these problems. Thirdly, it can be argued that the discourse overlooks the positive contribution to boys' development made by women. The present author's research with 'involved' fathers (Robb, 2004) found that they often cited their mothers as a key influence on their own 'caring' behaviour.

### 3. Transferability issues

#### 3.1 Austria

The low take-up of parental leave by men, identified as a problem in the discussion paper, is also a concern in the UK. This paper, like the others, prompts the question as to whether too much emphasis is being placed on care in the immediate post-birth period. Are there measures that could be taken to encourage shared care of older children? However, as this paper suggests, encouraging early paternity leave is a first step, a 'door opener' to other actions. The paper also raises the question as to whether the aim of these policies is simply to support women's participation in the labour market, or to benefit men and children as well. The Papamonat ('daddy's month') initiative in the civil service is interesting, but the lack of pay would be the main constraint if implemented in the UK. An entitlement to unpaid leave would be unlikely to have much influence beyond those already committed to shared care. The suggestion of making the Papamonat obligatory would not transfer well to the UK, and might even be seen as a form of social engineering. The notion of a Department for Men's politics is also interesting. In the case of Austria, it seems to have a positive emphasis on gender equality. Without such a clear focus, there would be a danger that such structures reinforce a sense of men as victims.

#### 3.2 Iceland

On the evidence presented here, the UK shares some common features with Iceland's welfare system, as well as recent experiences of recession and austerity. The policy of imposing gender quotas in public organisations is probably less acceptable in the UK, where it is still a contentious issue, even in the selection of political candidates. The idea of a working group on engaging men in gender equality would be very welcome in the UK, as a way of uniting disparate initiatives. As in the case of Austria, the clear focus on gender equality is vital, to avoid competition for resources between women and men. As mentioned above, the notion of mandatory paternity leave would probably meet with opposition in the UK, perhaps being seen as imposing a specific form of family arrangements on diverse family forms and traditions. The notion of an independent right to paternity leave is important, and would tackle some of the problems of low take-up currently experienced in the UK. It is also encouraging that, in the Icelandic context, the emphasis is less on labour market participation and more on children having the right to enjoy the care of both parents. The research quoted in Section 2 supports the effectiveness of individual non-transferable rights, and the evidence here is that measures of the kind adopted in Iceland can have a striking impact on behaviour, demonstrating that they are necessary if not sufficient for real change to occur. The

problems of ensuring access to parental leave by separated fathers are well articulated here, and would be similar in the UK.

### 3.3 Finland

It was encouraging to see the paper attending to the issue of violence against women, which has also been important in UK debates about men's role in promoting gender equality. As with similar measures in Austria and Iceland, the establishment of a men's subcommittee, with a clear commitment to gender equality, would be a helpful development in the UK. Some of the informal organising around men's and boys' issues echoes much of the work that has been happening at the non-governmental level in the UK. The shared care system of parental leave, with details left to parents' discretion, is similar to the new UK scheme. The issues surrounding gender differences in health and life expectancy, and the concern about disproportionate rates of suicide and poor mental health among boys and young men, are reflected in debates and policy discussions in the UK.

### 3.4 Summary

These three papers show that a right to independent, non-transferable, and preferably paid parental leave for fathers can play a vital part in encouraging men to participate in the care of their children. However, the suggestion that this leave should be mandatory, or that government should dictate the details of how parents use it, would probably not be popular in the UK. The papers all suggest that the aim of parental leave policies should be the promotion of caring masculinities, as much as encouraging participation in the labour market. All three papers propose the establishment of specific governmental structures to address men's issues, but this needs to be done within the context of promoting gender equality.



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