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Instruments to foster long-term paternal involvement in family work

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Instruments to foster long-term paternal involvement in family work: the view from the UK

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1. Country context: The United Kingdom¹

1.1. Background

To date, there has been both concerted and uneven initiatives and policy developments focused on fostering father involvement in family life in the UK. These reflect a significant growth in research on family lives, caring responsibilities and paid work and in particular the role that fathers (can) play in these different domains. Debates have taken place against a broader backdrop of changing workplace cultures, global economic demands and more nuanced understandings of gender. In this context, there have been commitments by successive UK governments to support the balancing of family and work life and individual 'choice'. For example, the Conservative Government has recently asserted its commitment 'to supporting mothers and fathers to balance work and family life' noting that, 'all things being equal, many fathers and partners would want to spend more time with their children [and] the Government is keen to help ensure that fathers play a full role'².

The introduction of different work/family policy initiatives can be seen as attempts by Governments to support mothers and fathers, in work/family choices, but these have had mixed/limited success as detailed further below. It is clear that whilst policy can signal change, it alone does not ensure behavioural change, especially in relation to historically-etched, gendered practises of familial care, paid work and paternal involvement. For example, in the UK the policy focus has centred on a tradition of 'long, mother-centred leave' (Baird and O'Brien, 2015:209). In some debates too, there has been a tendency for the terms 'parenthood' and 'motherhood' to be conflated in discussions of family caring and work responsibilities and vigilance is required in relation to how language is used.

Working parenthood has become the norm³ in the UK and expectations of father involvement in family work/care have changed. Fathers are more visibly involved in their children's lives and are more involved in aspects of their care when compared

¹ It is important to note that the United Kingdom of Great Britain comprises England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, some political and administrative powers have been devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland following Acts of Devolution. This means that some policies – and practices - related to paternal involvement in family life/work may differ in different areas of the UK e.g. Year of the Dad initiative in Scotland <http://www.yearofthedad.org/> was actively supported by the Scottish government.

² Fathers and the workplace: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2017-2019)

³ In 2015 in the UK 79.8% of people aged 16 to 64 with dependent children were employed. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/workingandworklesshouseholds/apriltojune2018#main-points>

to their own father's practices. However, it remains the case that mothers in couple families continue to take responsibility for twice as much childcare, and most of the domestic work in the home. Even though the percentage of women with young children who either go back to, or begin, full-time work has increased from 55.8% in 1997 to 65.1% in 2017 (ONS, 2017), mothers are still much more likely to work part-time than fathers, 38.2% mothers compared to 6.9% of fathers (ONS, 2017). But there is some change as more fathers are working part-time compared with 20 years ago, even so numbers remain very low (an increase from 3.9% in 1997 to 6.9% in 2017). Research continues to show that in the UK men's employment is much less affected than women's when they become a father. Recent research focusing on work-family arrangements using British data (from 2001-2013) concluded that 'a new gender egalitarian equilibrium has not yet been reached' (Connolly et al, 2016).

1.2. Childcare

The availability of childcare is a complimentary and necessary policy support for the achievement of family work/care balance. In the UK, the provision and affordability of childcare remain major issues for many working families and especially those who work atypical or irregular hours. Childcare is supported by a combination of rights at work (e.g. maternity leave, shared parental leave) and through mixed provision across public sector organisations, private companies and individuals/family members. In England all families have an entitlement to a total of 570 hours of childcare (from 'approved' providers) for 3-4 year olds and working families can receive a total of 1,140 hours per year (30 hours free childcare a week). For families in receipt of particular state benefits childcare may also be available for 2 year olds. Some tax concessions against childcare costs are also available and for some parents receiving tax credits and universal credits (types of state assistance) other childcare support (more hours) is available. Childcare provision can be complex to negotiate and there are differences in provision in the different nations of the UK⁴. Childcare can be prohibitively expensive and influences working decisions and patterns of work, e.g. 50 hours per week in a nursery for a child under 2 years costs between £232.84 and £305.92 per week⁵. Informal care provided by Grandparents is an important part of the childcare mix for many families, with approximately 40% of grandparents providing regular childcare for their grandchildren.

1.3. Paternity Leave

The first policy initiative to promote paternal involvement in the UK was the introduction of two weeks paid paternity leave⁶ in 2003. This was extended in a limited way by the Additional Paternity Leave Regulations and Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) Regulations passed in 2010, which entitled eligible working fathers to take up to 26 weeks of additional paternity leave (APL), in addition to the two weeks already provided, for each child from 2011⁷. This change in leave arrangements, was predicted to have a 'negligible' impact on the number of fathers who would make use of the new legislation, which was indeed the case⁸. From April 2015, APL was replaced by the introduction of Shared Parental Leave, which is discussed further below. More recently employed men also have a right to take *unpaid* leave to accompany their pregnant wife/partner to (up to) 2 antenatal

⁴ <https://www.childcarechoices.gov.uk/>

⁵ <https://www.moneyadvice.service.gov.uk/en/articles/childcare-costs#full-time-childcare-costs>

⁶ This policy allows fathers or same-sex partners to take two weeks leave, paid at a rate of £140.98 per week or 90% of the person's average weekly earnings, whichever is lower.

⁷ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2010/1056/contents/made>

⁸ <http://www.tavinstitute.org/news/additional-paternity-leave-unlikely-to-have-an-impact/>

appointments. Other policies, which fathers can use, are aimed at employed individuals more generally, rather than specifically fathers, for example, the right to request flexible working⁹ was introduced in 2014, and *unpaid* 'ordinary' parental leave, which was extended in 2015.

1.4. Shared Parental Leave

The introduction of Shared Parental Leave (SPL)¹⁰ in 2015 was heralded as a significant policy initiative and new opportunity for father involvement in family work. In theory, the policy provides eligible couples (determined according to stringent employment criteria) with flexibility and choice in relation to how family life and paid work are organised during the first year following the birth (or adoption) of a baby. The policy was claimed in some political quarters to challenge 'the old-fashioned assumption that women will always be the parent that stays at home', and claimed to recognise that 'many fathers want that option too'¹¹. For those who are eligible (and so meet employment-related criteria), Shared Parental Leave allows parents (and adopters) to flexibly share up to 50 weeks of leave in up to 3 separate blocks of time and/or together in the first year after their child is born. However, SPL is in reality a new use of existing maternity leave and can only be taken if maternity leave¹² is ended (early) *and does not give exclusive rights to fathers*. SPL is paid as Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP) which is paid at the flat rate of £145.18 a week (April 2018-April 2019) or 90% of an individual's average earnings, whichever is lower. Importantly, both mothers and fathers have to be employees in order to meet eligibility criteria for shared parental leave to be an option.

Since the introduction of SPL in 2015 rates of take up have been disappointingly low¹³. In the first year only a minority of fathers - between 0.5 and 2 per cent of eligible men – had taken up SPL¹⁴, a much lower uptake than the proportion of fathers who take parental leave in other European and especially Nordic countries. Research shows that many couples remain unaware of this policy. Government and other organisational campaigns have sought to promote and demystify the policy for example, through the following initiatives:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-share-the-joy-campaign-promotes-shared-parental-leave-rights-for-parents> and
<https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/shared-parental-leave-videos/>

2. Policy debate

Broader concerns which relate to issues of family work/life balance have included recent public debates on the gender pay gap, documented across many industrial and public-sector employers in the UK. The gender 'gap' has once again illuminated the 'Motherhood penalty' (Correll et al, 2007; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2015) as well as focused (some) attention on other inequalities linked to how families are supported (e.g. flexible working, childcare provision) including inequalities in paternal leave. The lack of uptake by fathers of Shared Parental Leave and a recent review by the Women and Equalities Committee on Fathers in the Workplace¹⁵ have

⁹ Flexible working rules are different in Northern Ireland. <https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay/eligibility-for-birth-parents>

¹¹ Nick Clegg, (2014) Leader of the Liberal Democratic Party <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-25148457>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/maternity-pay-leave>

¹³ <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/article/2017/united-kingdom-low-take-up-of-shared-parental-leave-scheme>

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-43026312>

¹⁵ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/358/35802.htm>

led some politicians from across the political spectrum to call for a rethink of the SPL policy and the need for three months paid, non-transferable Parental Leave for fathers¹⁶. The need for ‘use-it-or-lose-it’, non-transferable leave *for fathers* is seen by many commentators as a key requirement to foster (ongoing) paternal involvement, with quantitative research showing ‘that fathers in the United Kingdom who share childcare when the child is nine months old are significantly more likely to share childcare when the child is three years old’ (Fagan and Norman, 2016).

Reasons for low take up of SPL have focused on the fact that, even if conditions of employment status are met, many fathers/ couples cannot afford to take SPL because it is paid at a low flat rate, well below men’s median full-time (gross) weekly earnings. There has also been recognition that mothers can be reluctant to give up a portion of their maternity leave for their partner¹⁷. The SPL policy is not easy to navigate and eligibility criteria mean that 2 in 5 working fathers with a child under one do not qualify for SPL because their partner is not in paid work¹⁸.

3. Transferability aspects

Aspects of the German policies aimed at achieving ‘an equal distribution of work and family responsibility within the household’ have transferability potential to the UK context. These are considered further below:

- *The equal sharing of work and family responsibility on a partnership basis’ –* The language of ‘partnership’ is powerful, although in the UK the term ‘shared’ (as in Shared Parental Leave) has not captured imaginations or led to any significant cultural change – yet.
- *‘Income-related benefit to parents for the first 12+2 months after a child is born’ (parental allowance) – with the aim to motivate fathers to stay at home’ and ‘Compensation for loss of income’ -* The loss of earnings, especially where men are the higher wage earner has been a challenge in the UK when trying to get men to use Shared Parental Leave or use unpaid Parental Leave. Economic necessity (and the gender pay gap) make take-up much harder for some groups/many fathers. Income-related benefits seem key in promoting leave as a real family ‘choice’.
- *‘Parents are encouraged to combine part-time work and parental allowance benefits’ – ‘Part time work and parental allowance plus (PAP)’ -* Changing the workplace culture and language in the UK from the still-often assumed, full-time (masculine) worker, where part-time work is ‘woman’s work’ (‘the working mother’) is a major challenge. The greater acceptance of part-time, flexible working patterns and recognition that hours at work do not directly correlate to productivity is necessary among employers and employees (fathers) in the UK context.

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/28/improve-shared-parental-leave-to-cut-gender-pay-gap-urge-mps>

¹⁷ www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Working-Families-SPL-briefing-paper-January-2016.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/two-five-new-fathers-won%E2%80%99t-qualify-shared-parental-leave-says-tuc>

- *‘Child care guaranteed for all children from aged 1 years’ – ‘The expansion and provision of institutional childcare’* – This comprehensive and joined-up initiative is fundamental to enabling family life and paid work to be balanced/reconciled. In the UK there are too many gaps in provision (e.g. between 1 and 2 years), and a lack of accessible affordable and flexible care. Too often parents (mothers) are involved in piecing together childcare arrangements (grandparents, child-minders, nursery provision, friends etc.) because of the lack of joined up, affordable provision. Clearly, this is also a problem in some respects for the German system (*‘a lack of almost 300,000 places for children in Germany in 2017’*).
- Complex systems - *‘However, these instruments and the related conditions stay complex and are not always easy to understand for both parents and companies. Some parents still believe that fathers are only entitled to two months of parental allowance’* – How to make policies clearer and easier to navigate for all parties (employers and employees) is a concern in the UK. Online sites¹⁹ have been set up to assist individuals and couples in checking their eligibility for types of leave and childcare, many of which in the UK are dependent on employment status.
- *‘Expanding the share of non-transferable partner months could thus be a way forward to increase long-term paternal involvement in family work’* – It is interesting to consider more generally across the different countries if there is a critical period of time which facilitates fathers in taking on the primary care role, so that they are not always taking a supporting role (e.g. working from lists/instructions from the mother). Does 12 weeks (or more or less?) solo caring/primary responsibility facilitate this and overcome maternal primacy in this domain? (Miller, 2011; 2017). A key question for our consideration is how caring responsibilities and capacities becomes perceived and practised (from child care to elder care). Changing gendered norms and values remains a key challenge.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The UK awaits the ‘paradigm shift’ which has taken place in German family policy as outlined in the German discussion paper. At a national level, the recent recommendations from the Women and Equalities Committee Report on Fathers in the Workplace²⁰ included the following recommendations specifically to foster paternal involvement in family life from a workplace/employer perspective:

- Statutory paternity pay should be paid at 90% of the father’s pay (capped for higher earners) to help ensure that all fathers, regardless of income, can be at home around the time of their child’s birth;
- The Government should consider the costs and benefits of introducing a new policy of 12 weeks’ standalone fathers’ leave in the child’s first year as an alternative to shared parental leave when it reviews the policy this year;
- The Government should legislate immediately to make a reality the Prime Minister’s call for all jobs to be advertised as flexible from day one, unless there are solid business reasons not to;

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/pay-leave-for-parents>

²⁰ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/358/35802.htm>

- The Government should harmonise workplace rights for fathers who are agency workers or self-employed with those for employed fathers where practical – for example by introducing paternity allowance similar to maternity allowance.

The Government have responded to these recommendations, but not in ways which prioritise a commitment to fostering gender equality in family work²¹. Other organisations and commentators agree there is a national need to take a more radical overview of how policies could work together to promote a more comprehensive level of support for working families (including grandparents) (<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org>; <https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk>; www.grandparentsplus.org.uk; Baird and O'Brien, 2015). This would require a normalisation of flexible working conditions for fathers as much as for mothers; increased provision of affordable and accessible childcare so that (flexible) working is possible, well paid Parental Leave (ideally at full or 80%+ salary replacement), with fathers having an individual entitlement to leave²², rather than transferred from the mother (as is the case with SPL), the 'use-it-or-lose-it' model of leave (O'Brien and Koslowski, 2016; O'Brien et al, 2015; Miller, 2013; Moss et al, 2012). Research has shown that 'the most direct and far reaching policy to encourage fatherhood involvement is though paternity leave', but especially in policies 'that give exclusive rights to fathers' (Feldman and Gran, 2016; Brandth and Kvande, 2016). There are broader cultural questions about how fathers are encouraged to work more in the early years sector and also how ideas of caring capacities are framed in ways that equally encompass men/fathers. Changes in these areas could help to shift attitudes and behaviours and help to promote real choices for fathers and mothers in their family work practices.

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²¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/1076/107602.htm>

²² <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2018/evidence-suggests-3-month-daddy-leave-could-fix-uk-gender-equality-deficit/>

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