

# Book Review: Designing Parental Leave Policy: The Norway Model and the Changing Face of Fatherhood

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## Book Review

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Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande.

*Designing Parental Leave Policy: The Norway Model and the Changing Face of Fatherhood*. United Kingdom: Bristol University Press. 2022. 238 pp. £24.99. ISBN: 978-1529201581.

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Strong leave entitlements for fathers has been used as a policy tool to facilitate a cultural departure from the traditional breadwinner role of fatherhood to a modern evolution of involved fatherhood. Although we are yet to see such cultural change globally, parental leave has a distinctly high uptake by fathers in Norway (2). The increased participation of fathers in childcare has been attributed to a father's quota of parental leave that was introduced in Norway, which provided a fifteen-week father-only leave entitlement (7). In *Designing Parental Leave Policy*, Brandth and Kvande explore the reasons underpinning its success and investigate the extent to which the father's quota has provided a work-family balance for fathers, supported the development of father-child relationships and contributed towards a marked shift from hegemonic masculinity to caring masculinity.

Brandth and Kvande primarily argue that the provision of an individual right to leave for fathers has altered the external and internal perception of fatherhood to include a caring role. The policy design of a father-only leave entitlement has generated the external societal expectation that fathers undertake care work. Additionally, many fathers who were home alone on leave had internally developed greater competency as carers and particularly acquired a need-oriented care practice where they could read their child in order to identify and meet their needs. Relying upon the data obtained from a series of interviews conducted with fathers in the 1980s before the introduction of the father's quota, in the 1990s after its initial introduction as a 4-week entitlement and in the 2000s after being extended to a 10-week entitlement, Part 1 reveals the importance of the design of the father's quota in increasing paternal involvement in childcare. Unlike shared parental leave which provided parents with the option to decide between themselves who could take leave in 16 or 26-week periods, fathers encountered a greater sense of entitlement to the father's quota as the leave scheme was

a generously compensated exclusive right for fathers that was “prenegotiated’ by the state’ (198). Fathers were hesitant to take shared parental leave as they had to negotiate their use of the scheme with mothers. However, the individualisation of parental leave for fathers was non-transferable and the high uptake by fathers contributed towards their participation in childcare becoming a societal norm.

Part 2 demonstrated that the increased participation of fathers in childcare was partly responsible for a transformation in male identity from hegemonic masculinity to caring masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity portrays fathers as financial breadwinners, whereas caring masculinity depicts fathers as involved caregivers. Fathers who undertook childcare responsibility alone for extensive time periods had greater potential to develop skills pertaining to parenting, cooking, cleaning and emotional and relational competence. Fathers also recognised that childcare was laborious and had cultivated a deeper respect for the care work performed by mothers. Brandth and Kvande determined that the concept of involved fatherhood best characterised Norwegian fathers, as they placed importance upon factors such as spending time with their children, emotional bonding and providing hands-on care. Part 3 showcased how the uptake of parental leave by fathers has challenged the masculinist workplace culture, which denotes that fathers should subscribe to the “ideal worker” norm and display a singular commitment to paid employment. Care work performed by fathers has instead become a workplace norm as many managers have utilised the father’s quota themselves and are familiar with handling any potential problems that may arise after an employee takes leave. From a national standpoint, employers’ associations and trade unions also support the leave system. The overall workplace support provided to employed fathers collectively assists them in fostering a work-family balance.

*Designing Parental Leave Policy* is highly beneficial to scholars and policymakers whose expertise relates to leave policies, fatherhood, families and gender equality. The invaluable research exhibited in this book details how the integration of care into the masculine identity can be partly achieved through the provision of well-compensated individualised leave entitlements for fathers. Brandth and Kvande underline that effective support for fathers in the home promotes adherence to the dual carer/dual earner model wherein mothers and fathers equally undertake childcare and workplace responsibilities. Gender-equal parenting helps to deconstruct the sex-based stereotypes surrounding parenting roles wherein mothers are recognised as primary caregivers and fathers are perceived as secondary. Although a complete departure from traditional parenting roles is dependent upon the interplay between successful leave policies and current socio-economic trends, *Designing Parental Leave Policy* reinforces the importance of the law being a normative tool that can advance cultural change.

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