Gerardo MEIL, Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain
Pedro ROMERO-BALSAS, Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain

FATHERS ON LEAVE ALONE IN SPAIN

Leave for caring children has a long tradition in Spain, beginning in 1931 when a specific social insurance to protect working mothers was introduced. Initially conceived only for women, in 1989 the right to take leave for caring children was also extended to men, who can take till 10 weeks of the fully paid maternity leave and till 36 weeks without any pay parental leave. In 2007 a specific leave for fathers only (paternity leave) was introduced, lasting only 2 weeks fully paid. This period was preview to be extended till 4 weeks, but till the present this has not happened.

The body of research literature on the use of parental leaves in Spain has growth, especially in the last decade. Although there are not many studies about the use of parental leave by fathers, there is an increasing interest in analyzing how fathers are using Spanish childcare leaves. Currently, there is very little research about the specific experiences of fathers who carry out childcare alone and have also used some kind of childcare leave (Haas & O’Brien, 2010). Thus, there is a great opportunity to research different dimensions of fathers who use childcare leaves while the mother is working.

Knowledge of the experience of these fathers, the added value they represent from a sociological perspective of family, the uses of time, gender equality, and balance of work and family life, will widen our understanding of the emerging changes affecting paternity roles. Previous studies have shown that fathers who use parental leaves devoted more time to childcare (Meil, 2013). Others studies have found relevant the length of the leave used to obtain higher implication on childcare by fathers (Haas & Hwank, 2008; Duvander & Jans, 2009). Concerning Spanish fathers who use parental leaves, they have a discourse that considers childcare not as a right but as a duty (Romero-Balsas, Muntanyola-Saura & Rogero-Garcia, 2013). However, we still do not know if there is deeper involvement in childcare and changes on gender roles in those fathers who use parental leaves while their partners are working.
Likewise, there is a lack of information about how the different social actors evaluate the impact and cost of paternity incentives. Another line of research about fathers who use leave alone is their preference in terms of welfare, balance of work and family life. Similarly, it would be worthwhile to inquire into the process of negotiation/decision-making involved in carrying out childcare alone while on leave, what defines couple dynamics, and the strategies they have followed in the past to balance work and family life. As it has been pointed out, workplace characteristics have a paramount importance to how the parental leave is used (Brandth and Kvande, 2002, Hass et al, 2002, Meil et al, 2007). Therefore, other elements of interest are the consequences of the use of leave alone in gender role distribution, the links with children, and the effects on an individual’s professional career.

Our object of study are fathers who take at least four weeks of any kind of childcare leave (e.g. maternity leave, parental leave, and lactation break) during at least four weeks while the mother is working. The main aim is to understand their strategies and which are the discourses of this group of fathers about the impact and consequences of taking a solo leave; decision-making process, masculinities and gender ideology, and work and family balance policies.

Our methodological approach is qualitative and our research technique is based on in-depth interviews by phone. We carried out a discourse analysis approach and we have created families, codes and categories in order to systematize discursive elements. We used the software atlas.ti. To analyze the experience of fathers who have taken a leave for caring children while mothers go back to paid work, we have selected (till the present) a snowball sample of 11 fathers who have taken one or more of these leaves for at least 4 weeks. Most of them have take paternity leave at the same time as their partners have taken maternity leave, but used part of the (fully paid) maternity leave; only in 3 cases men took an unpaid parental leave. About half of the interviewed men worked in the private sector (6), while the rest worked in the public sector (5) in very different professions: laboratory technician, mechanic, secondary education teacher, engineer, clerk, nurse, policeman, self-employed manager and concierge. Geographically they live in big, middle and small cities, all around the country.

The very preliminary analysis suggests that there are two main strategies or reasons to take the leave alone. One is instrumental, either because the partner is self-employed or earns more money, or because they are involved in an international adoption, which requires to be at least one month in the home country of the child before returning to Spain. Economic or procedural reasons are the main logic to explain why they decided to take the leave, given the preference for non paid childcare at least during some time. The second group of reasons is fundamentally expressive and ideologically driven by a new model of caring fatherhood, intertwined with egalitarian gender role models. However, in nearly all the cases, grandparents are not easily available to take care of the children, so additional considerations on available resources for balancing working and family lives play a role. Duration of the leave is in most cases rather short, not involving more than the four weeks threshold, what implies that fathers on leave alone are not against paid childcare. Time use during leave is centered on caring the new born child, with some interruptions coming from demands from the working sphere and not changing fundamentally previous division of housework among the partners. The reaction of the social network in which they are embedded was in most, but not all cases, positive and supportive, while none of them report important negative reactions from side of the employer. These results suggest that only men who know in advance that they will not suffer discrimination after returning to the workplace take such a leave.

References


