

Norwegian Parents' Reconciliation of Work and Family: a Case Study¹

Conciliación entre trabajo y familia de padres noruegos: estudio de caso

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the impact of parental permission in a kindergarten in Bodo, Norway, and the strategies of conciliation between the work and family lives of men and women. Likewise, the influence that social policy and public institutions have on their participation in the labor market and in household chores. This conceptualization is based on the focus of welfare regimes by Esping-Andersen (1990), in which the intersection of actions by government, families and labor market determine the course of life. The study is based on qualitative information resulting from in-depth interviews and observation. Findings indicate that the framework of permissions has led parents to having to program the birth of their children according to the start of school activities, thereby avoiding paying for child-care services on their own.

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Key words: parental permission, kindergarten, work, family, conciliation.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio de caso analiza el impacto de los permisos parentales en un jardín de niños en Bodo, Noruega, y las estrategias de conciliación entre el trabajo y la vida familiar de los hombres y las mujeres; así como la influencia que las políticas sociales e instituciones públicas tienen sobre su participación en el mercado laboral y en las tareas del hogar. La conceptualización se basa en el enfoque de regímenes de Esping-Andersen (1990) en la cual la intersección de las acciones del gobierno, familias y el mercado de trabajo determinan el curso de la vida. El estudio se basa en información cualitativa proveniente de entrevistas a profundidad y observación. Los resultados señalan que el esquema de permisos ha provocado que los padres de familia tengan que programar el nacimiento de sus hijos con el inicio de actividades escolares y así evitar pagar por servicios del cuidado de manera privada.

Palabras clave: permiso parental, jardín de niños, trabajo, familia, conciliación.

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INTRODUCTION

Before the second half of the twentieth century, in general, family organization was based on defined responsibilities of fathers and mothers (Goldin, 1990). Fathers worked outside the home and were in charge of providing goods and services for the rest of the household members, whereas mothers were responsible for housework and childrearing. Since the Second World War, structural changes came up and women's participation in the labor market notably increased in most developed countries (Le faucheur, 1993). Today women in Norway have one of the highest participation rates in the labor force in the world (Statistics of Norway, 2013).

Women's entry into the labor market is one of the most significant factors that have influenced family dynamics and redefined men's and women's roles (Levine, 1990). In the presence of higher participation rates of women and men in the labor force, social policies that promote reconciliation between work and family life become crucial for people's development. Norway has been a leading country in designing and implementing social policies that aim to help people combine their family life and work. On one side, empirical studies suggest that paternity leave has increased fathers' involvement in childcare (Brandth & Kvande, 2003; Naz, 2010; O'Brien, Brandth & Kvande, 2007). On the other side, innovative institutions such as kindergartens in Norway bring parents an option to take care of their children when the parental leave ends and they return to their jobs.

The purpose of this case study is to identify the influence of institutions and social policies on women's and men's participation in the labor market and domestic and care giving tasks in Bodo, Norway. Specifically, this paper analyzes the impact of parental leave and kindergartens on family organization and the strategies that women and men adopt to reconcile work and family life. The conceptualization of this study rests on Esping-Andersen's regime approach (1990), in which the intersection of governments' actions, families, and the labor market determines the life-courses of both women and men. Understanding the interactions of these components constitutes a critical task when analyzing people's wellbeing and the way people organize for the spheres in which they participate.

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FAMILY-FOCUSED POLICIES AND PRACTICE

In Norway, parental leave consists of a length of time either 47 weeks with full salary or 57 weeks with 80% salary. Parental leave starts three weeks before the

birth and these weeks are exclusive for mothers. Mother's quota is 14 weeks. The six weeks after the birth are part of the mother's quota and the remaining eight weeks must be used continuously. Twelve weeks of the total period are reserved for fathers (father's quota). These weeks are mandatory for fathers and cannot be transferred to the mother. The remaining weeks can be shared between the mother and father. Parents are entitled to receive this benefit if they were engaged in a work-oriented activity six months before the birth. Additionally, parents who adopt a child are also eligible for parental leave. According to the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (2013), parental leave is guaranteed for all parents if they accomplish these requirements and apply on time.

Parental leave permission has two primary objectives. First, it aims to facilitate parents' reconciliation of work, studies, and family life. Second, it intends to promote fathers' involvement in early childcare. These objectives are established along with the assurance of parents' income (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2013).

Regarding kindergartens, they "shall, in collaboration and close understanding with the home, safeguard the children's need for care and play, and promote learning and formation as a basis for an all-round development" (Government of Norway, 2005, p. 1). Services provided by kindergartens are received directly by children who attend the kindergarten. However, because attendance to kindergartens is not mandatory, Ministry of Education and Research (2013) states that these institutions serve to provide parents a resource to combine their work, studies, and family life. Therefore, services provided by kindergartens are geared towards children and parents.

Children in Norway may attend kindergarten when they are from 0 to 5 years old. One head teacher takes care of the children. In addition, there must be at least one pedagogical leader per every 7-9 children younger than three years old or one pedagogical leader per every 14-18 children over the age of three. Kindergartens are open from 7 am to 4 pm, and parents may leave and pick up their children anytime. Funds for kindergartens come from the government, municipalities, and parents. Parents' maximum monthly fee is NOK \$2 330 (\$288 dollars) for both private and public kindergartens. This fee is established based on parents' economic situation (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013). In order to provide all children access to kindergartens, the educational system in Norway ensures a place for every child that is one year old no later than by the end of August of every year. However, this is condi-

tional to an application during specific dates. Based on observation, children's activities at the analyzed kindergarten are comprised of playing outside, singing, taking naps, playing educational games, eating lunch, being involved in cooking bread, cleaning up the kitchen, drawing, and going out for trips. Parents' participation is promoted through monthly meetings and the existence of a parents' council and a coordinating committee in each kindergarten (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013). During these meetings parents discuss aspects regarding pedagogical activities and the functioning of the kindergarten. Parents have full access to the kindergarten facilities. They leave and pick up their children from their classroom.

CASE STUDY

This case study is based on qualitative material. To collect information I used in-depth interviews and observation. This research took place at a kindergarten located in Bodo, Norway from May 27th to July 19th, 2013. Parents who received services from the kindergarten constituted the target group of this study. Two interview guides were designed: one for professionals working at the kindergarten and the other one for parents of children who attend the kindergarten. A researcher interviewed four fathers, two mothers, and four couples with both parents at the moment of the interview. In this case study, each interview –when either only one parent or both parents were present– is considered to be the unit of analysis. Thereby, this study analyzes ten cases. The same interview guide designed for users was utilized with mothers, fathers, and couples. To triangulate the information provided by the interviewees, the researcher interviewed one head teacher and did observation for one week at the kindergarten.

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Based on the objective of this study, in-depth interviews and observation were the most appropriate and feasible methods to employ. Surveys' structure may provide little information about the way couples make decisions and how they solve the problems that they face when reconciling work and family life. On the other hand, observation enabled the researcher to understand the functioning of the kindergarten and to detect possible discrepancies between parents' opinions and situations that they face. Because this case study intends to analyze the effect that parental leave had on people's lives, which already occurred, in-depth interview is useful in obtaining information about people's opinion with regard to past events. In addition, in-depth interview is a tool that

facilitates the collection of more information to understand complex phenomena. This technique offers insights into the strategies that couples adopt when facing difficulties to reconcile work and family life. Although in some cases only one parent was interviewed, participants referred their interaction with their partner. On the other hand, interviewing the head teacher allowed deepening on children's and parents' experiences and their interactions with the kindergarten. The head teacher's opinions provide another perspective of families' life.

Once selection criteria were established, I used convenience sampling to access participants. One head teacher put us in contact with the interviewees. Regarding the relationship of the researcher to the interviewed parents, this was effective because before the interviews parents had gotten used to the researcher while she was doing observation at the kindergarten. Also, it is important to highlight the support received from the principal and the head teacher of the kindergarten. Due to this support and a letter provided by the University of Nordland, parents agreed easier to be interviewed and were confident of the use of the information that they provided.

TABLE 1

PARTICIPANTS' SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS										
Case	Interviewee(s)	Marital Status	Mother's Age	Father's Age	Number of Children	Children's Age	Mother's Schooling	Father's Schooling	Mother's Working Hours (per week)	Father's Working Hours (per week)
1	Couple	Cohabiting	38	38	2	18 months and 4 years old	College	College	30 hours (nightshifts)	38.5 hours
2	Father	Cohabiting	31	32	2	4 and 6 years old	College	College	38.5 hours	168 hours two weeks and then, two weeks off
3	Mother	Cohabiting	30	33	2	3 and 6 years old	High School	College	10 nights per month (nightshifts)	38.5 hours
4	Couple	Cohabiting	41	41	3	5, 8, and 17 years old	College	College	37.5 hours	37.5 hours
5	Mother	Married	30	33	2	4 and 6 years old	College	College	34 hours (nightshifts)	40 hours
6	Couple	Divorced	35	48	2	5 and 7 years old	College	High School	37.5 hours (nightshifts)	37.5 hours
7	Couple	Married	33	41	2	2 and 4 years old	College	College	37.5 hours	37.5 hours
8	Father	Cohabiting	26	25	2	2 and 5 years old	High School	High School	30 hours	35 hours
9	Father	Cohabiting	38	38	3	3 months, and 2 and 4 years old	College	College	37.5 hours	37.5 hours
10	Father	Married	36	38	2	2 and 6 years old	College	College	37.5 hours (nightshifts)	37.5 hours

Fuente: González (2007, p. 115).

The main methodological challenges were related to parents' time availability. However, as the researcher was flexible and available full time, the interviews were done with no inconveniences. Some ethical concerns arose when interviewing both parents together. Possible conflicts between both parents were probably to occur, especially those issues that addressed discrepancies between both parents or had not been considered or discussed before by the interviewees. As this situation could not be avoided and the information and both standpoints were crucial for this study, in order to minimize such problems, the researcher intended to be sensitive to those situations. The researcher let them know that they were not obligated to answer all questions and could finish the interview at any time they wanted. The result of these precautions was completely satisfactory. Even when one respondent did not remember some situations very well and the other one had to include more details or clarify some aspects, they seemed interested to remember their experiences and discuss them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of this case study. The first subsection analyzes the importance of working in interviewees' lives and their status in the labor market. The second subsection examines permission leave and interviewees' strategies to combine permission leave, kindergarten, housework, and childcare.

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All participants consisted of heterosexual persons who at least had a child attending the analyzed kindergarten at the moment of the interview. Selection criteria did not discriminate by partners' education level, age, labor situation, or economic status. Table 1 presents the main sociodemographic characteristics of the participants and a classification number to refer each case. Participants consisted of four fathers, two mothers, and four couples in which both the father and mother were interviewed together. Their age ranged from 25 to 48 years old. All participants and their partner were born in Norway, except for one who was born in Latin America. Concerning participants' marital status, six cases were cohabiting, three married, and one divorced. Both members of the divorced couple lived alone. Regarding the number of children, eight families had two children, and the other two had three children. The highest education level among the participants was college, and the lowest was high school.

Labor Force Status and the Importance of Working in their Lives

All participants were involved in an economic activity. In general, they participated in the labor market more than 30 hours per week, except for the woman of case 3 who was also a student. All mothers worked slightly fewer hours than fathers. Regarding the importance of their jobs, all declared that working is very important in their lives not only because it lets them maintain their living status, but also because it is an important component of their social life. One woman pointed out that society does not entirely accept women who do not work outside the home and these women are less likely to have friends. Moreover, some considered that working outside the home allows them to use their abilities and give back something to society.

In addition, all interviewees said that their partner's labor force status was important to them because working is a social component and it is better than being at home all day. On the other hand, when the participants were asked whether they would work if they had enough money, all but one of the interviewees declared that they would not stop working, but they would reduce their participation in the labor market. Many stated that they had never thought about it because working is an important aspect in their lives. When couple 4 responded to this, she answered that they had never thought about it, but her husband mentioned:

- 88 Oh yes, we have done it. You know, sometimes when we look at the lottery and people win 15 million kroner and we think what we would do with that money, but never on the list of things we would do it is stop working. May be we would take a sabbatical or we'd take 6 months off and go to Thailand or somewhere, but it has never come up to stop working (Man 4).

Concerning flexibility at work, five of the analyzed mothers worked nightshifts because they were nurses. All participants but two considered that mothers have less flexible jobs and in some cases this derived from the fact that fathers had better job positions than mothers.

Parental Leave Permissions, Housework and Childcare

Regarding parental leave permissions, only one of the interviewees decided to increase their parental leave. The rest of the participants stated that they did

not do so due to economic reasons. One woman declared that although she chose to receive 100% of her salary during her parental leave, her income decreased because she could not earn the income that she made working extra hours. Couple 7 increased their parental leave and received 80% of their salary, but they said that they considered their economic situation when deciding to extend their permission.

Concerning their employment protection during and after the parental leave period, none of the interviewees were afraid of losing their jobs or opportunities to improve their job position in the future. They declared that when they were expecting their children, they felt the Norwegian system guaranteed their social benefits. Many indicated that being separated from their children when they left them at the kindergarten was the only difficulty that they faced when returning to their job.

During their parental leave permission fathers seemed to increase their awareness about housework burden after they had their children. They declared that during their parental leave they realized that housework increased significantly.

...all of them –a lot of guys I know that have a paternal leave– clean the garage, fix the balcony or build something I don't know how they do it because what you find is that taking care of a child is actually quite a lot of work and when it finally sleeps, during the day, you are either so tired that you just want to go to sleep or you have a lot of house chores... (Man 4).

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However, none of them reduced their working hours after having their children. In contrast, three women worked fewer hours than before the birth. All indicated that after having their children, fathers spent more time taking care of their children and doing household chores. Some interviewees pointed out that parental leave allowed fathers to learn more about childcare.

I think that if he hadn't had paternal leave, he wouldn't have known the children as much (Woman 7).

Although many fathers indicated that housework increased, they did not mention an increase in the time they spend doing domestic tasks. Also, activities related to the care of children were the kind of activities that a great majority of the fathers mentioned that they did during their parental leave.

...as much as possible –I did domestic tasks–, but you know basically it was the child... (Man 1).

In contrast, the majority of mothers indicated that they increased their time doing both domestic and care giving tasks. Initially, all the interviewees declared that both parents did the housework and care giving tasks equally. They maintained that they did the same type of activities. After reflecting on housework sharing, many modified their initial response. Parents realized that they did not do the same activities in the household.

It was reduced –the time I spend doing domestic tasks– because now I spend more time with the children [...] Most of the time we share it –domestic work–, but my girlfriend is doing most of the cleaning and I cook food (Man 2).

...but I do a little bit more of caring the house, washing floors and he is doing more of taking care of cars and outside the house. But equal (Woman 5).

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Regardless of this, the majority of the interviewees made an effort to spend the same time as their partner doing housework and care giving tasks. Also, parents' involvement in housework and care giving tasks was influenced by their job characteristics. The more flexible job or the better job position they had, the more participation in care giving activities they had. Partners of women who work nightshifts spend more time alone with their children while women work. Nonflexible jobs of women increased fathers' involvement in childrearing. For instance, the man of case 4 had more available time to leave and pick up his children at school because he had a better job position than his partner. Also, usually the father of case 10 was the one who would leave and pick up his two children at the kindergarten and took care of them at night because his wife worked nightshifts and in the morning she rested.

Concerning childcare, none of the participants experienced problems to get a place for their children in kindergarten. Nevertheless, many affirmed that they had to plan their children's date of birth to combine their parental leave with the start of activities at kindergartens. As children cannot enter kindergarten before August, if their parental leave ends before children can attend kindergartens, parents need to look for additional help.

The only problem is the start time. It doesn't correspond to our parental leave. So we had to have a nanny in that period with the first child. [...] So, from May to August we had the nanny (Man 7).

...they were born in June and April. It is easier because if you have them in any other season you may have problems (Woman 5).

When children cannot attend kindergarten, in a great majority of the cases parents drew on additional help to take care of their children. Usually, it came from their relatives, mainly from grandparents. However, if their relatives did not live close, parents were forced to hire private services or ask friends for help. In most cases, help from friends was limited because they also worked. Therefore, private services were the most feasible means, especially when they needed help more frequently.

However, parents may require additional help to take care of their children when they are single, divorced, or separated, their relatives do not live close, or their job lacks of flexibility. For instance, the father and mother of case 6 were divorced and divided the custody of their children. Each one had them full time for a week. Both shared their children's expenditure on clothes, education, and health care equally. Each one paid for children's food and recreation during the week that the children were with them. The family of the woman of case 6 does not live in the country. In contrast, the mother of the man of case 6 lives in the same city. In some occasions when they had the children with them, they had to work at night. In this case, the father received help from his mother. Meanwhile, the mother of the children had to hire private services because in her community there were not institutions that provided these services after 4 pm. With regard to this, she declared to have limited economic resources to pay for private services to take care of her children. As a consequence, woman 6 tried to schedule her nightshifts and worked extra time the week that she did not have the children with her, but many times it was not possible. She declared that she wanted to have the children full time, but it was not possible due to the characteristics of her job.

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CONCLUSIONS

The two different social policies analyzed in this paper, parental leave permission and kindergartens, can be classified into models of services and policies that seek to work with the family unit as a whole in order to focus on shared needs, develop strengths and address risk factors that could not be dealt with through a focus on family members as individuals. On one side, parental leave permission aims to increase fathers' involvement in childrearing and consid-

ers that this is a responsibility of both parents. On the other side, kindergartens intend not only to develop abilities and educate children, but also to contribute to parents' reconciliation of work and family life.

For Norwegian women their career plans and the situation at their job have a relevant significance in their lives. Specifically, they have a relevant influence on their decision concerning the date when they plan on becoming mothers (Suñmer, Smithson, Dores, & Granlund, 2008), but as found in this study, social policies also influence the motherhood cycle. In order to receive childcare services, women and men in Norway are forced to plan the date of birth based on the start of kindergartens and the end of their parental leave. To provide childcare services to children at the same age independently from their date of birth, the kindergarten system needs to be more flexible with the start dates or bring different services through other institutions to those parents whose end of their parental leave does not correspond to the start dates of kindergartens.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that parental leave permission and kindergartens accomplish one of their principal goals: to help parents reconcile their work and family life. However, due to the limiting operation hours of the kindergartens in the community where this study took place, parents who do not receive extra help from their relatives or friends and their job schedule does not correspond to the kindergarten become families that require additional services to combine their family and work. Regarding additional needs of some families for childcare services, it is important to mention that in other areas of Norway there are kindergartens that work after 4 pm, but in the community of this study that service was not available. Due to kindergartens' operation hours, in some geographical areas needs of some families are not addressed. These families are those whose parents work nightshifts and do not have extra help to take care of their children when the kindergarten is closed.

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Despite Norway has been a leading country in implementing and designing new programs and policies to help parents reconcile their work and family life, all types of families do not have equal access to these because they do not face the same situations. As this case study showed, single, separated, and divorced parents might have less additional childcare resources to draw on. In addition, their job conditions play an important role to combine their work and family life. Moreover, as the labor market becomes more flexible in Norway, the kindergarten system needs to adapt its services to the new realities families face.

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