

WHAT SUPPORTS ENGAGED FATHERING?

EMPLOYMENT AND **FAMILY SUPPORTS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The intent of this paper is to promote informed dialogue and debate. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of FIRA or of other researchers/collaborators associated with FIRA. Communications can be addressed to the author.

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EMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

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Public policy attention is increasingly focused on labour market attachment, which is argued to be essential for our competitiveness in a global economy. This leaves others clamouring for similar attention directed to social reproduction, the day to day activities necessary to caring for ourselves and dependent others amidst the crush of competing labour market demands. This is often described as the cash/care nexus, where cash by way of employment income competes with our care needs and responsibilities (Bezanson, 2006; Hearn, 2002; Hobson and Morgan, 2002). The role of fathers in this cash/care nexus is of increasing interest.

“Engaged” or “involved” fathering has been shown to have multiple types of effects on families and this, combined with women’s rates of labour market participation, has forged new considerations about the appropriate role for fathers and the appropriate levels of social policy oriented to supporting more engaged fathering. This paper focuses on Canadian fathers as “subjects of social policy” (Hobson and Morgan, 2002). Policies such as maternity, paternity and parental leave arrangements, employment standards, childcare provisions and cash and in-kind supports to families are revealing of a state’s expressed ideology with respect to families and the expected roles of fathers. Canada’s use of gender-neutral language in parental leave policies is an illustration of the ideology that underlies existing policy. Perhaps simply by offering a “choice” to families, gender neutrality makes father involvement a matter of negotiation at the level of the family rather than a matter of state interest. This contrasts sharply with Quebec policy, which offers a markedly different set of family support policies. Thus analyses of these differing policy agendas are enabled.

Employers too play key roles in supporting work/family balance through workplace provisions such as lieu time, flexible hours, family sick time, etc. These provisions, even when offered, need analysis to determine their take-up and their impacts on fathers and families.

This paper examines current Canadian social policy provisions and surveys the standards of practice or “take-up” for policy provisions supporting men’s fathering roles. Data from Sweden and other comparator states establish a context for an examination of Canadian policy and whether and how it might move beyond simple gender neutrality to support men in their roles as fathers.

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WHAT SUPPORTS ENGAGED FATHERING?

EMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

The paper explicates the following thesis: that policy related to the labour market, such as paternity and parental leave, childcare and employment standards legislation regulating hours of work and leave provisions, all contribute to father involvement. However, such policies exist within a broader ideological and political context which has much to do with both how far these policy provisions extend and, even more fundamentally, with whether they really help to engage fathers. In short, this paper suggests that a combination of social norms supporting gender equality and well-placed, effective public policy will both be necessary to more engaged fathering.

We have examined father involvement policy in each of Sweden, Germany, the U.S. and Canada.

We have examined father involvement policy in each of Sweden, Germany, the U.S. and Canada. We have noted that Canadian public policy provisions fall between the U.S. and Sweden and Germany, the latter two countries having much more extensive provisions for parental leave, increased flexibility about how such leaves may be utilized, stronger systems of public and subsidized childcare and an employment environment which continues to be more closely regulated. In Canada, by contrast, outside of Quebec, we have no national childcare provision and the paltriest of cash benefits in lieu of childcare are paid to parents of young children. Where subsidized and licensed daycares do exist, they are always wait-listed and have an inadequate amount of subsidy dollars available to meet demand. Additionally, the Canadian labour market is increasingly without the regulation of employment standards legislation as the precarious labour market – consisting of unregulated part-time and casual workers – grows alongside a decline in the numbers of people in a standard (and hence regulated) employment relationship. Our strong Employment Insurance parental leave program does afford paid leave to many working Canadians and is a strong element of the policy system that might enable more involved fathering. Yet it too suffers from restricted eligibility, leaving out the growing number of non-standard workers and the self-employed. It is a gender-neutral provision too, so that while men may choose to take parental leave, the system provides no additional supports for them to do so. Recent comparisons between fathers' use of paid parental leave in and outside of Quebec provide important insights into the effects of alternative social policy approaches in this area.

Beyond public policies, “additional supports” warrant further scrutiny. We have discussed, pointed to and referenced a number of factors that may be compounding in the environment in which men make decisions about their roles as fathers. First, do they make decisions, or do they simply take up the scripts of hegemonic masculinity that are everywhere around them?

WHAT SUPPORTS ENGAGED FATHERING?

EMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

These scripts are shaped by our social norms: the behaviours and attitudes that are constructed through processes of social reproduction. Sweden is alone, among the countries examined, in articulating a policy goal that directly challenges these normative social roles, in contrast to the more passive “enabling” of most policy. The Swedish government campaign was directed at fathers and would-be fathers (and their female partners) to cause them to reconsider the social expectations of fathers. Very pragmatically, training programs for prospective fathers accompanied the media campaign, followed by strong policy provisions that would provide men with few reasons not to choose to take paternity leave. In many respects the Swedish policy initiative has been successful, with 85 per cent of Swedish fathers taking leaves. And we know from other research (Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel, 2007; Haas and Hwang, 2005; Wisensale, 2001; Hwang and Lamb, 1997; Lamb, 1997) that, having taken care of their children at an early age, fathers may be more likely to continue to be more involved with their children at a later age.

So, while Sweden clearly tried through policy to shift the public discourse on fathering, other recent research points to several other factors not addressed in Sweden or elsewhere, which likely affect men’s willingness to take up new and more engaged fathering roles.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the corporate employment environment has not been re-oriented to support men’s leave-taking and even less their being more involved fathers with stronger commitments to their family life. Work/family balance remains a significant workplace issue, a fact attested to by articles on the subject published in the past few years in journals of business, sociology, social policy, and family studies (Daly and Hawkins, 2005; Palkovitz and Daly, 2004; Duxbury and Higgins, 2003; Evans, 2002). These articles decry the blurring of boundaries between work and family and claim either that the attention to work-family conflict is due to the increase in the number of women in the labour market or from a gendered lens and argue that, given women’s presence in the labour market, new family-oriented policy responses are in order. Caring for children and elders continues to fall along gender lines and absenteeism as a result of employees taking time off from work to care for family members has a significant economic impact. It is estimated that Canadian organizations lose 2.7 billion dollars each year because of excess work absence from employees “working under conditions of high work-life conflict” (Duxbury, Higgins, and Johnson, 1999, 7.2.4). A potential resolution to this

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WHAT SUPPORTS ENGAGED FATHERING?

EMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

conflict will likely occur only when men seek both to engage more as fathers and carers and when their work environment legitimizes their doing so.

A major factor recognized consistently across the literature examined for this policy review is the salience of the father's work environment in impacting on his leave-taking choices (Ferrer and Gagne, 2006; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005; Pulkingham and Van Der Gaas, 2004). While leave provisions may be available, a work climate which gives tacit or not-so-tacit messages about family leaves as impeding careers will affect father's and mother's choices about father leave-taking. "The caregiving responsibilities of fathers or same-sex couples may not be recognized because of stereotypes and assumptions about appropriate family structures and so these employees may have difficulty in having their Code-related needs [i.e., right to parental leave] recognized and appropriately dealt with by employers. For example, it may be assumed that fathers will not or should not take parental leave and those who do may be perceived as not being serious about their careers" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005, p. 22).

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The male partner continues across most countries examined to be the higher income earner (Statistics Canada, 2007b; Chronholm, 2002), which adds additional weight to a man's work disruption and the employer's having a negative view of his work "commitment." Sweden once again provides a good exemplar: Sweden's combined media campaign and policy addressed most factors relating to engaging fathers, but did not, by way of either challenge to the prevailing discourse or by fiat, address the resistance to be expected from the work environment if men's primary attachment to the labour market were to shift in favour of, or even to be equal with, that of their family.

A second and perhaps more insidious factor affecting men's more active fathering roles is women's responses to men's parental leave-taking to care for a newborn or newly adopted child. Although there is limited data in this area, women may want to continue to be primary carers in these roles (Statistics Canada, 2005), taking up the same normative scripts that their male partners do with respect to gendered parental roles. While most women want more equality in the day to day care of the home, this may not extend to giving up maternity leave time so that this leave can be taken by a male partner.

WHAT SUPPORTS ENGAGED FATHERING?

EMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

Adaptive policy could address both of the above noted issues, but the policy response would necessarily need to be oriented primarily to supporting families and changing and broadening entrenched gender roles. This is unlikely to be accomplished if family policy remains only an adjunct to labour-market retention policy. The public policy that we have reviewed has been labour-market oriented, with the addition of social goals, and only sometimes have these been specifically directed to fathering rather than more generally to families. As long as fathering practices are an “add-on” to labour-market retention policies or even to gender neutral family policy, they are not likely to be as strong or directive as they might need to be to challenge such deeply embedded social roles and the ideology that underlies them.

Canadian social policy has done little to encourage fathering models other than “father as breadwinner.” Gender neutrality, as has been pointed out by numerous feminist theorists, perpetuates the status quo. Thus, the state is only very minimally engaged in developing the capacity of Canadian men to care for their young children. In fact, more broadly, the state has developed only limited and piecemeal policies that support caring labour.

Men balancing the breadwinner role with a more active caregiver role have the opportunity to model a different notion of citizen that extends beyond the labour force to include the nurture and care of future generations. With these changes in men’s roles come corresponding changes in women’s roles, facilitating perhaps more balance between the private and the public spheres, with men and women able to negotiate equitably their place in each. In a Canadian context, Quebec’s family policy provisions offer a model which, while not new to some of the E.U. nations, offers a challenge nationally and to the other Canadian provinces: to address and prioritize the needs of families amidst the work/family balance crisis, and actively and specifically to encourage fathers to be engaged carers. If we shift from our present policy conservatism, changes of the type discussed here and in the accompanying policy recommendations will be likely to have long-term consequences as they model new social roles.

(Appendix A makes recommendations for future research and Appendix B makes policy recommendations.)

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