

# Gatekeepers or Enablers of Leave? Managerial Characteristics and the Uptake of (Un)Paid Parental Leave in Sweden

Flore Debruyne<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Sociology, Demography Unit, Stockholm University*

## ABSTRACT

Fathers' uptake of parental leave remains limited, even in gender-progressive contexts such as Sweden. While managers are important in shaping workplace support for parenthood, little is known about how their characteristics influence fathers' leave-taking. This study investigates how managerial gender, age, education, and the managerial structure of the workplace are associated with fathers' parental leave length.

Using population-wide employer-employee linked administrative data, I identified the highest-earning manager in each workplace and linked them to fathers of first-born children born in 2017. OLS regressions estimated fathers' paid, unpaid, and total parental leave days as Swedish parents combine paid parental benefit with the right to unpaid leave.

Preliminary results show clear and consistent associations. Fathers with female managers took more leave than those with male managers, and those whose managers held a Bachelor's degree or higher took substantially longer leave across all measures. Fathers in workplaces with a sole manager took less leave than those with multiple managers, while fathers with older managers took only slightly more leave. These associations extend across paid and unpaid leave.

The findings highlight the managerial level as an overlooked factor shaping fathers' parental leave behavior.

## INTRODUCTION

Working fathers seek to be involved in family life and strive for an egalitarian division of care (Burnett et al., 2013; Fletcher, 2020). Policies such as parental leave and the introduction of non-transferable months for fathers were designed to encourage this involvement (Brandth & Kvande, 2019; Haas & Hwang, 2019b). However, substantial gender inequalities in leave uptake remain (Dobrotic et al., 2024). Even in Sweden—often regarded as a forerunner in gender-equal family policy—fathers from children born between 2014 and 2017 took only 20% of the available parental leave (Fahlén, 2023). Although Swedish fathers express a belief in the importance of caring for their children (Almqvist, 2008), they often struggle to reduce their paid work commitments. This tension reflects broader contradictions between the ideal worker norm that expects uninterrupted work and the expectations of involved fatherhood (Acker, 1990; Atkinson, 2023).

While parental leave uptake is viewed as a family decision, workplace context is crucial (Haas & Hwang, 2019a). Managers, in particular, hold considerable influence: they negotiate leave requests and help shape the workplace climate around parenthood. Managerial authority and fathers' concerns about career penalties can discourage leave-taking (Bloksgaard, 2014), while managerial support can enable it (Brandth & Kvande, 2019). Despite this evidence of managers' influence on fathers' leave decisions, little is known about how specific managerial characteristics—such as gender, age, or education—shape fathers' parental leave length. A few studies have explored the role of managers' gender on parental leave uptake (Fuwa, 2021; Haas & Hwang, 2009), but broader evidence remains limited.

This study investigates which managerial characteristics either enable or constrain fathers' parental leave length in Sweden. Using Swedish employer-employee linked administrative data covering the full population, I identified each workplace's highest-earning manager and linked them to fathers of first-born children in 2017. The data uniquely includes both paid and unpaid parental leave days, allowing for a comprehensive measure of total time fathers spend away from work to care for their child (Duvander & Viklund, 2020). Preliminary ordinary least squares (OLS) results show that fathers with a female manager, a manager holding a Bachelor's degree or higher, an older manager, or multiple managers took significantly more parental leave days than those with a male manager, a less-educated manager, a younger manager, or a sole manager. Further analyses will include a full set of control variables, explore potential interaction effects, and apply multilevel models.

## BACKGROUND

Managers are important actors in shaping employees' parental leave decisions (Bloksgaard, 2014). While operating within legal frameworks, they possess discretionary power that can either enable or constrain fathers' leave-taking. In Norway, managerial support has been described as crucial: taking leave signaled responsible fatherhood, while not taking leave was socially disapproved of (Brandth & Kvande, 2019). Similarly, few Finnish fathers reported employer objection as a barrier to their leave-taking (Närvi & Salmi, 2019). In contrast, managers can also discourage fathers from taking leave by invoking career threats (Hennekam et al., 2023; Samtleben et al., 2019). Hennekam et al. (2023) found that even supervisors who were fathers themselves and had previously benefited from flexible work arrangements dissuaded fathers from accessing similar policies. These findings indicate that managers may function as enablers or gatekeepers in the implementation of family policy.

Evidence on which managerial characteristics matter for parental leave uptake, however, remains limited. Most studies focus on gender, showing that workplaces led by female managers or with a higher share of women in top positions tend to be more supportive of leave-taking (Fuwa, 2021; Haas & Hwang, 2009; Mun & Brinton, 2015). Furthermore, Norwegian research has shown that fathers who are managers themselves were less likely to take leave beyond the reserved quota (Brandth & Kvande, 2002). However, previous studies have not examined how managers' age or education relates to fathers' parental leave length. Given that fathers' own age and education are associated with leave uptake (see for example Eriksson et al., 2022), and that gender role attitudes vary across generations (Bornatici et al., 2020; Crompton et al., 2005), these characteristics may also shape managerial support for fathers' leave length.

### A. PARENTAL LEAVE IN SWEDEN

Swedish parental leave is regulated by two complementary laws: the Social Insurance Code (*socialförsäkringsbalken*), which governs parental leave benefits, and the Parental Leave Act (*föräldraledighetslagen*, 1995:584), which establishes the right to take leave from work to care for one's child, regardless of whether they receive parental benefits. Consequently, parents may alternate between paid and unpaid leave, extending the total time spent at home. As a result, total parental leave—including both paid and unpaid days—is often longer than the number of compensated days (Duvander & Viklund, 2020; Fahlén, 2023).

Despite policies promoting equal leave-sharing, mothers still take most paid and unpaid leave. Fathers of children born between 2014 and 2017 accounted for 22% of paid, 17% of unpaid, and 20% of total parental leave days (Fahlén, 2023). Around 30% of all leave days

during a child's first two years were unpaid, indicating that analyses limited to paid leave underestimate fathers' total caregiving time (Fahlén, 2023).

## ANALYTICAL DESIGN

I use full-population Swedish employer-employee administrative data from the *longitudinal integrated database for health insurance and labor market studies* (LISA) to link individuals to their managers and workplaces. The analytical sample includes 23,268 fathers of firstborn children in 2017 who were employed across 13,950 different workplaces with identifiable managers in the year before birth.

**Main dependent variable: parental leave.** Parental leave is measured as the total number of days fathers were on leave during the first three calendar years following their child's birth (2017-2019). Since most parents return to work before their child turns two (Eriksson, 2019), summarizing leave across these years ensures full coverage of fathers' leave-taking. Three outcomes are distinguished: (1) *paid parental leave*, defined as the number of days fathers received a parental leave benefit; (2) *unpaid parental leave*, defined as the number of leave days without benefit; and (3) *total parental leave*, combining paid and unpaid days to capture the full period of fathers' absence from work.

**Main independent variables: managerial characteristics of the highest-earning manager.** I identified the highest-earning manager in each workplace in the year before birth (2016), as income reflects managerial power. Four characteristics are included: (1) *manager's gender*, a dummy variable indicating whether the manager is a woman or a man; (2) *manager's education*, based on the highest ISCED 2011 level attained and coded as Bachelor's degree or higher versus lower than Bachelor's degree; (3) *managerial structure*, a dummy variable distinguishing between a sole manager and the highest-earning manager in workplaces with multiple managers; and (4) *manager's age*, measured as a continuous variable in the year before birth.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Initial OLS regressions—estimated without the full control set—show clear and consistent associations between managerial characteristics and fathers' uptake of paid, unpaid, and total parental leave days. Fathers working with female managers took about a week more leave than those with male managers, suggesting that women in managerial positions may foster more supportive norms around fatherhood and caregiving. Similarly, fathers whose managers held a Bachelor's degree or higher took considerably longer leave across all measures, indicating that higher-educated managers may endorse more egalitarian views. In contrast, fathers in

workplaces with a sole manager took less parental leave than those in workplaces with multiple managers, implying that a more distributed managerial structure may reduce dependence on a single manager's attitudes. Fathers with older managers also took slightly longer leave, suggesting modest generational differences in managerial support for caregiving. The inclusion of paid, unpaid, and total leave measures revealed that these associations extended beyond the compensated component of parental leave.

*Table 1.* OLS regression of fathers' parental leave length (days) on managerial characteristics

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
	<b>Paid leave</b>	<b>Unpaid leave</b>	<b>Total leave</b>
Intercept	96.46 (130.92)***	35.24 (0.52)***	131.70 (1.10)***
Female manager (REF = male)	6.83 (1.12)***	2.28 (0.79)**	9.10 (1.66)***
Manager with BA degree or higher (REF = no BA)	13.76 (0.95)***	7.90 (0.67)***	21.66 (1.41)***
Sole manager (REF = multiple managers)	-6.54 (1.13)***	-2.51 (0.80)**	-9.04 (1.67)***
Manager's age	0.44 (0.05)***	0.23 (0.04)***	0.67 (0.09)***

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; standard errors in parentheses.

Subsequent analyses will incorporate a full set of control variables capturing fathers' sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., education, age, migration background, income, and managerial status) and workplace factors (e.g., gender composition, size, and sector). It will extend to additional managerial attributes, such as managers' own family situation and parental leave use. Interaction effects will be explored, and multilevel models can disentangle variation across individuals, managers, and workplaces.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Forte) under Grant 2021-01161.

## REFERENCES

- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>
- Almqvist, A.-L. (2008). Why Most Swedish Fathers and Few French Fathers Use Paid Parental Leave: An Exploratory Qualitative Study of Parents. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research & Practice about Men as Fathers*, 6(2), 192–200. <https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0602.192>
- Atkinson, J. (2023). Reconciling the ideal worker norm and involved fatherhood: New fathers' experiences of requesting Shared Parental Leave in UK organizations. *Community, Work & Family*, 0(0), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2023.2274276>
- Bloksgaard, L. (2014). Negotiating leave in the workplace: Leave practices and masculinity constructions among Danish fathers. In G. B. Eydal & T. Rostgaard (Eds.), *Fatherhood in the Nordic Welfare States: Comparing Care Policies and Practice* (pp. 141–162). Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447310495.007>
- Bornatici, C., Gauthier, J.-A., & Le Goff, J.-M. (2020). Changing Attitudes Towards Gender Equality in Switzerland (2000–2017): Period, Cohort and Life-Course Effects. *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, 46(3), 559–585. <https://doi.org/10.2478/sjs-2020-0027>
- Brandth, B., & Kvande, E. (2002). Reflexive Fathers: Negotiating Parental Leave and Working Life. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 9(2), 186–203. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00155>
- Brandth, B., & Kvande, E. (2019). Workplace support of fathers' parental leave use in Norway. *Community, Work & Family*, 22(1), 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1472067>
- Burnett, S. B., Gatrell, C. J., Cooper, Cary. L., & Sparrow, P. (2013). Fathers at Work: A Ghost in the Organizational Machine. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 20(6), 632–646. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12000>
- Crompton, R., Brockmann, M., & Lyonette, C. (2005). Attitudes, women's employment and the domestic division of labour: A cross-national analysis in two waves. *Work, Employment and Society*, 19(2), 213–233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017005053168>
- Dobrotic, I., Blum, S., Kaufman, G., Koslowski, A., Moss, P., & Valentova, M. (2024). *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2024*. OSF. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/2frts>
- Duvander, A.-Z., & Viklund, I. (2020). How long is a parental leave and for whom? An analysis of methodological and policy dimensions of leave length and division in Sweden. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40(5–6), 479–494. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-06-2019-0108>
- Eriksson, H. (2019). Taking Turns or Halving It All: Care Trajectories of Dual-Caring Couples. *Europeafern Journal of Population*, 35(1), 191–219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-018-9473-5>
- Eriksson, H., Billingsley, S., & Brandén, M. (2022). Parental Leave within the Workplace: A Re-assessment of Opposite Educational Gradients for Women and Men. *Sociology*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221109743>
- Fahlén, S. (2023). *Vilka föräldrar använder obetald föräldradedighet?* (No. 2023:11) [Elektronisk resurs]. Inspektionen för socialförsäkringen.
- Fletcher, T. (2020). The 'Good Father.' In T. Fletcher (Ed.), *Negotiating Fatherhood: Sport and Family Practices* (pp. 99–126). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19784-1\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19784-1_4)
- Fuwa, M. (2021). Women Managers' Impact on Use of Family-friendly Measures among Their Subordinates in Japanese Firms. *Work, Employment and Society*, 35(4), 716–734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017020987409>
- Haas, L., & Hwang, C. P. (2019a). Policy is not enough – the influence of the gendered workplace on fathers' use of parental leave in Sweden. *Community, Work & Family*, 22(1), 58–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1495616>
- Haas, L., & Hwang, C. P. (2019b). Workplace support and European fathers' use of state policies promoting shared childcare. *Community, Work & Family*, 22(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1556204>

- Haas, L., & Hwang, P. C. (2009). Is Fatherhood Becoming More Visible at Work? Trends in Corporate Support for Fathers Taking Parental Leave in Sweden. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research & Practice about Men as Fathers*, 7(3), 303–321. <https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0703.303>
- Hennekam, S., Kelland, J., & Dumazert, J.-P. (2023). Paternal supervisor gatekeeping: How supervising fathers hinder other fathers at work in their uptake of flexible work arrangements. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 30(1), 94–111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12904>
- Mun, E., & Brinton, M. C. (2015). Workplace Matters: The Use of Parental Leave Policy in Japan. *Work and Occupations*, 42(3), 335–369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888415574781>
- Närvi, J., & Salmi, M. (2019). Quite an encumbrance? Work-related obstacles to Finnish fathers' take-up of parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, 22(1), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1487828>
- Samtleben, C., Bringmann, J., Bünning, M., & Hipp, L. (2019). What Helps and What Hinders? Exploring the Role of Workplace Characteristics for Parental Leave Use and Its Career Consequences. *Social Sciences*, 8(10), Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8100270>