

Sharing parental leave: a must for equality

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[The bill on equality between women and men](#), approved by the Senate on 18 September 2013, includes a component aimed at modifying the arrangements for access to the allocation of parental leave [\[1\]](#) by introducing what is called the free choice of activity (“CLCA”). The latest [OFCE Note \(no. 34 of 26 September 2013\)](#) analyzes the consequences of this measure for gender equality and proposes other possibilities for a broader reform.

The right to the allocation of parental leave is a family right: it is allocated to a parent who cuts their working time or ceases working altogether in order to care for a child, for a maximum period of 3 years. Noting that 98% of the beneficiaries are women, the law aims to encourage fathers to take it up: henceforth, out of the 36 months allocated for parental leave, 6 must be taken by the other parent. In other words, once the mother has taken 30 months of parental leave, the father must take over or else the family will lose the remaining 6 months. The UNAF, which opposes the reform, has published [a survey on “fathers and parental leave”](#) on its website. Arguing that the two sexes are complementary, it opposes the principle established in the law aimed at promoting the sharing of family responsibilities between mothers and fathers. Furthermore, the lack of childcare for young children is highlighted as a barrier to any modification of parental leave, on the grounds that this would accentuate the organizational constraints on parents of young children. Nevertheless, the gendered nature of parental leave is making this programme an obstacle to equality, even if some of the recipients say they use it out of personal choice. Making progress on gender equality thus requires reforming the

mechanisms for access to parental leave. But will the proposed legislative changes be sufficient to shake up the boundaries of the existing sexual division of labour?

Redistributing the constraint between mothers and fathers

Given the struggle against the discrimination that affects most women, failure to make the CLCA reform would amount to introducing the freedom to use leave by some mothers and the freedom not to use it for all fathers. Parental leave is of course not the only factor responsible for gender inequality, but it is a driving force, and occupational inequalities in turn reinforce this inequality.

A policy designed to promote occupational equality cannot therefore avoid the reform of parental leave. Ending this vicious cycle necessitates major changes to this programme. Leave that is shorter and based on an individual right that is non-transferable between spouses, with compensation linked to the beneficiary's income, would undoubtedly be more attractive to fathers and would promote equality ([Méda and Périvier, 2007](#)). While not directly egalitarian in itself, such a scheme would have the enormous advantage of ensuring women's autonomy in relation to their spouse, thereby making economic empowerment a principle of public policy. But it is not possible to shorten the duration of parental leave without having first filled the gap in childcare for young children, which is currently estimated at 350,000 places [\[2\]](#). The re-organization of leave should therefore be part of an overhaul of early childhood care. Otherwise, shortening parental leave would wind up further increasing the burden weighing on parents, and mothers in particular. An ambitious early childhood care policy, featuring short parental leave paid in proportion to salary, would promote equality. This would require significant public expenditure, about 5 billion euros a year ([Périvier, 2012](#)). The trade-offs being made in the course of the government's budgetary adjustments point, however, to cutbacks in public spending.

In fact, due to a lack of funding, the proposed reform of the law is modest and will not really rebalance the sharing of family responsibilities between women and men. But it has the merit of highlighting the contradictions in society with respect to equality: without a requirement to share parental leave, this would be taken up only by women. The introduction of a period of parental leave allocated to the father will not directly increase the burden resulting from the shortage of childcare: the right to the allocation of parental leave is still 36 months for the family. It will merely spread the load between mothers and fathers. The trade-off facing fathers is the same as what mothers have faced for a long time. Given the low flat-rate amount of compensation, few fathers are likely to be tempted to take this leave. However, while the guidelines on budgetary matters are closing the door on any ambitious reform of early childhood care, women must not be the only ones to bear the consequences.

Reforming parental leave is thus imperative for equality.

[1] It is important to distinguish the allocation of parental leave as such from parental leave in terms of labour law (Labour Code Article L. 122-28-1), which, subject to certain conditions, guarantees that all employees will regain their job after taking parental leave for a period of one year, which is renewable three times. The first is paid by the CAF within the broader context of family policy, subject to certain conditions (rank of the child, past activity, etc.). The conditions of access in terms of past activity are more flexible for granting eligibility for the allocation than parental leave in the strict sense. In fact, only 60% of CLCA recipients benefit from a guarantee of re-employment ([Legendre and Vanovermeir, 2011](#)).

[2] See, in particular, the Tabarot Report, [Périvier 2012](#).

