

# “It’s About Time!”: Company Support for Fathers’ Entitlement to Reduced Work Hours in Sweden

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Fifteen nations offer fathers the right to reduce work hours to care for children. Incorporating a gender perspective, this study uses a mixed-methods approach to examine the implementation of this policy in the first nation to offer it, Sweden. It investigates whether the institutional and cultural environment exerts pressure on companies to facilitate fathers’ hours reduction, companies’ levels of support for fathers’ use of this entitlement and correlates of company support. The persistence of the “male model of work” appears to be an important barrier to implementation of a policy that offers promise in offering fathers time to care.

## Introduction

Since industrialization, fathers’ contribution to family life has focused on breadwinning. Over time, as mothers joined the paid labor force, normative expectations for fathers have expanded to include hands-on involvement in caring for children (Coltrane and Behnke 2012). Despite changing expectations for their involvement in childcare, most men continue to work full-time (forty hours per week) (Pascall 2012). Indeed, many fathers work more than 40 h, fulfilling the traditional male breadwinning role and as a sign of organizational commitment. In the EU-27 nations, men’s average work hours in the childbearing ages of 25–46 were 45–46 hours in 2010 (Eurofound 2015). This is in spite of the fact that the average collectively agreed upon weekly work hours in 2010 was forty or less in every EU country (Eurofound 2011). International research indicates that fathers’ greater work hours are associated with lower participation in childcare (Koslowski 2011; McGill 2014; Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007) and higher levels of work-family conflict and stress (Aumann, Galinsky, and Matos 2011; Matos and Galinsky 2012; Öun 2012).

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The most common way employed mothers cope with the challenge of integrating work and family is working part-time (Hegewisch 2009). Employed fathers, on the other hand, rarely do (Fagan 2004), following the “male model of work,” which assumes that work and family life are separate, employees have little caregiving responsibility and employment should be full-time and life-long (Lewis 2001; Nagy 2008). International research suggests some fathers would like to work fewer hours (Anderson et al. 2009; Thornthwaite 2004), even with lower pay (Hobson and Fahlén 2009).

According to Lewis (2009), a key policy task from the perspective of achieving gender equality is to challenge the standard conception of full-time employment as ideal for men and for women, since this traditional male ideal interferes with having time to participate in caregiving. Public policies could alter the traditional working hour regime and therefore have a potentially important role to play in promoting gender equality by helping employed fathers manage caregiving with breadwinning. The right to temporarily reduce full-time work hours to part-time when their children are young is one policy that could dramatically improve fathers' opportunities to participate actively in childcare as well as decrease their work-family conflict and stress levels.

“Reduced work hours policy” is defined here as legislation that entitles employees (typically caregivers) to choose a temporary shortening of their work week, usually by one-fourth (to thirty hours), while retaining the same position or level. Hours reduction may or may not involve wage compensation, but social benefits associated with full employment continue. This entitlement exists in at least ten nations (Austria, Croatia, Finland, Greece, Italy, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, and Sweden) (Moss 2014). Leave is partially paid in four (Croatia, Finland, Greece, and Italy). It can last until a child reaches age one (in Italy), age three (in Croatia, Greece, Japan, and Slovenia) or until school age (Austria, Finland, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden). Five additional nations grant fathers the right to request reduced work hours, without pay, typically until children reach school age (Australia, Belgium, Netherlands, New Zealand, and United Kingdom).

Reduced hours is different from taking parental leave part-time while working part-time (an option in at least fourteen nations—Moss 2014). In Sweden, men rarely take leave part-time (93 percent of all leave days fathers took in 2014 were taken on a full-time basis) (Försäkringskassan 2015). Reduced work hours should also be distinguished from traditional part-time work. Part-time work involves a permanently shorter work week, typically with little job security and opportunity for advancement, low wages and few benefits. Lewis (2001, 358–9) suggests that part-time work, which deviates from the accepted norm, is socially constructed as “secondary, less committed, and inferior to full-time work.” Working reduced hours also deviates from the norm, but offers protection against occupational downgrading and benefit reduction (Fagan and Walthery 2014). In Sweden, only 10 percent of fathers

with children ages one to five in 2013 worked part-time (<thirty-five hours a week), compared to 43 percent of mothers (SCB 2014).

This paper's purpose is to draw researchers' and policymakers' attention to the challenges of implementing the reduced hours entitlement available to fathers in one particular country, Sweden, the first nation to offer fathers and mothers this right in 1978. Sweden provides an interesting setting to examine reduced work hours for fathers because it has officially adopted the goal of gender equality, including fathers' sharing childcare with mothers, and fathers' right to reduced work hours was proposed originally as a means of achieving that goal (SOU 1975).

Currently, Swedish mothers' and fathers' work hours are quite different. A more even balance of parents' employment hours has the potential to enhance equality in the domestic division of labor. Previous research shows that Swedish fathers are most likely to participate in family work when their work hours are similar to their partners' (Haas and Hwang 2008; Thomas and Hildingsson 2009). According to Fagan (2001, 1209), "Men's current work schedules create an organizational logic in the home that undermines attempts to renegotiate the domestic division of time."

While a few studies directly examine company support for employees' reduced hours (Fagan and Walthery 2014; Lee et al. 2002; Reidman 2006), none focuses on fathers. Understanding fathers' capability of taking advantage of the reduced hours policy is important because this policy offers fathers more time to care for their young children after their parental leaves are over (in Sweden, up to the time children enter school). This additional time can promote stronger father-child bonds and a more egalitarian sharing of childcare that can facilitate women's participation in the labor market. Moreover, until fathers have greater capability of adjusting work hours to family life, mothers' efforts to do so may result in workplace stigma and employment discrimination.

## Theoretical Background

Gender theory was used as the foundation for our exploration of the implementation of the reduced work hours policy for fathers in Sweden.

According to gender theory, gendered practices are reinforced or challenged at multiple levels of social structure, starting with the institutional level of the state (Hirdman 1988; Ridgeway 2011). Accordingly, laws such as reduced hours entitlement might put pressure on employers to facilitate fathers' work-family integration. Indeed, countries with reduced hours policies are more likely than others to report that employees have taken advantage of reduced work hours (Fagan and Walthery 2014). Sweden, as the first nation to adopt this policy, is an ideal setting to study if policy can undermine the gendered

norms at the workplace for men's full-time employment and limited caregiving responsibility.

Laws alone, however, cannot easily change a working time regime or a tradition of gender inequality. Gender theorists emphasize that gendered practices at the workplace are also reinforced or challenged at the cultural level of society, where norms and values can impact work organizations' interest in promoting work-family integration for men (Hojgaard 1997; Lewis and Smithson 2001). Sweden makes an interesting cultural setting to study the implementation of the reduced hours policy, because there has been for almost 50 years a growing cultural emphasis on men as caregivers (Lundqvist 2012).

At the organizational level, gender theory emphasizes that workplace culture is dominated by the "male model of work" (Acker 1998; Brandth and Kvande 2002; Holter 2007; Lewis 1997), based on two interrelated norms. The first is the "ideal worker norm," which calls for employees to display strong organizational commitment, particularly by participating lifelong and full-time in paid work. According to Lewis (1997, 13), an important barrier to organizations becoming more focused on work-family integration is the "organizational discourses of time as representing productivity, commitment and value." A second related aspect of the male model of work is the "norm of limited caregiving responsibility" (Votinus 2008). Employees are expected to keep their need or desire to care for family members from infringing upon paid work. Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács (2014) suggest that traditional organizational cultures, based on gendered assumptions, serve as important barriers to Swedish fathers' ability to convert rights to family-supportive policies into capabilities.

Given the prevalence of the male model of work, it is not surprising that the majority of European and U.S. companies report it as difficult to allow employees to reduce work hours (Fagan and Walthery 2014; Matos and Galinsky 2012; Reidman 2006). Our study explores if Swedish companies might also find it difficult to support fathers' right to reduced hours, even if the law has existed for thirty-five years and the culture supports involved fatherhood.

Gender theory is also useful for predicting why some companies might be more likely than others to conform to legislation by supporting fathers' reduced work hours. Our research therefore explores how several aspects of the gendered workplace culture are associated with company's support for fathers' reduced hours entitlement.

## Study Objectives

The study is organized around answering three research questions to investigate companies' accommodation of fathers' use of reduced work hours.

1. Gender theory suggests that employers act within specific institutional and cultural environments that set up gendered normative expectations for organizational policies and practices. Our study asks: *To what extent does the*

*institutional and cultural environment in Sweden create a normative climate that pressures companies to support reduced work hours for fathers?*

2. Companies operating within the same institutional and cultural environment may respond differently to pressure to adopt reduced-hours arrangements for fathers. Gender theory suggests that companies would have difficulty accepting new norms regarding men as caregivers and participants in part-time work. Relying upon a survey of large, profitable companies, our study asks: *To what extent do Swedish companies conform to the law by supporting fathers' use of their legal right to reduce their work hours to care for young children?*

3. Lastly, companies vary in support for fathers' use of the reduced hours policy. Gender theory suggests that companies moving away from traditional expectations regarding the male model of work would be more likely than others to support fathers' use of the reduced hours policy. Our study uses company data to test hypotheses related to gender theory to answer the question: *What types of companies are more likely than others to support fathers' use of reduced work hours?*

## Impact of the Institutional and Cultural Environment

Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott (2002) assert that companies experience three types of pressure that drive them to change work practices. Based on our reading of Swedish research and government reports, we apply these categories in our analysis to discover to what extent companies can be judged to be under institutional and cultural pressure to break with traditional gendered workplace practices to support fathers' entitlement to reduced hours. *Political pressure* occurs with "shifts in the interests and underlying power distributions that have supported and legitimated existing institutional arrangements" (Dacin et al. 2002, 46). *Social pressure* results from "changes in laws and social expectations that might hinder the continuation of a practice" (Dacin et al. 2002, 47). *Functional pressure* exists when organizational practices begin to be associated with perceived difficulties with performance (Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott 2002). Each type is analyzed below.

### Are Companies under Political Pressure?—The History of Working Time Policy

An analysis of working time policy in Sweden explains how the forty-hour work week became normative and the circumstances under which fathers gained the right to reduce work hours. This analysis reveals that policymakers, employers and unions have all played important roles in maintaining a political climate that reinforces the traditional gendered division of labor and encourages full-time employment for men.

The working hour regime in Sweden changed dramatically during the twentieth century. In 1900, a sixty-hour work week was standard. The development of a

strong union movement lead to bargaining for shorter hours and in time to legislation limiting hours to forty-eight in 1920. Employers opposed reducing the work week because they felt shorter hours would lower production and cause labor shortages. Unions, on the other hand, claimed new working arrangements could organize human resources more efficiently and new technology would enhance productivity (Otto<sup>sson</sup> and Rosengren 2007). Both employers and trade unions, however, agreed that men were more capable than women of working longer hours, so the push for shorter hours was mainly on behalf of women workers. According to historians Otto<sup>sson</sup> and Rosengren (2007, 94–5): “Having the capacity to work a longer day was correlated to ideas of strength and masculinity. . . . ‘A keen man’ was expected to have the capacity to work ten hours, and those who did not were obviously not ‘real’ men. [Thus] the man who could work long days became the norm. . . .”

Work hours were gradually reduced to forty by 1973 (SOU 2002). A concern for the health and well-being of workers was the main motive for action. Employers again expressed concern that productivity would be negatively affected by a shorter work week. However, a study of the twenty-year transition to the forty-hour workweek found an increase in economic productivity, because employers invested in laborsaving machinery and employees increased their work tempo (SOU 1976).

For the past forty years, however, there has been little change in the working time regime for men. In 2006, the average weekly work hours for men in full-time jobs was 39.9 h (Eurofound 2009). In 2010, 9 percent worked more than forty hours a week (Eurofound 2015), with 2 percent working forty-eight or more (OECD 2015).

Periodically, there have been discussions about the desirability of a six-hour workday. The most intense debate took place in the 1970s, at the height of the feminist movement. To expand the labor force, government commissions considered a shorter work week as a strategy to attract mothers; this was also regarded as a way to support fathers’ increased participation in childcare. One government report stated: “Worklife is presently to a large extent suited to a type of ideal worker who is . . . male. . . . Worklife . . . must be adjusted to a society where . . . responsibility for the household and children should to a large extent be shared” (SOU 1976, 149–50, our translation).

Government commissions stopped short of recommending legislation, for two reasons. First, they yielded to the warnings of employers that a shorter work week would hurt the economy, raising wage costs and leading to labor shortages. Second, they chose to continue Swedish precedent by leaving it up to unions to negotiate working time arrangements, a right held since 1950 (and strengthened in 1982) (Anxo 2009). Unions have been very strong in Sweden and still negotiate pay and working conditions for the vast majority of workers.

While government commissions recommended that unions negotiate a gradual reduction of the work week until a thirty-hour week was reached (SOU 1976),

unions have not pursued this vigorously. Bargaining for longer vacations and higher wages have been higher priorities (Anxo 2009) and the vast majority of union presidents in the private sector admit that supporting men as caregivers is not a union priority (Haas and Hwang 2013a). Unions, however, prevented the growth of a “long hours culture,” detrimental to fathers’ participation in childcare, by lobbying successfully for a law limiting overtime to 200 hours a year. In addition, their success in negotiating high wages makes overtime pay less necessary (Reynolds 2004). In 2010, only 11 percent of fathers reported working eight or more hours overtime the week before the interview (SCB 2012) and Swedish fathers are less likely to work overtime than fathers in most societies (Sayer and Gornick 2012).

Once it was clear that unions would not apply political pressure to shorten the work week a government commission established to promote family well-being proposed a six-hour day for parents of small children (SOU 1975), to “enhance opportunities for parents to genuinely share responsibility for home and children” (Regeringens Proposition 1977/1978: 104, 16–7, our translation). Parents’ right to reduce weekly hours to thirty until children become eight years old or complete the first year of school was passed as an amendment to parental leave legislation in 1978.

Although the original proposal included compensation for hours’ reduction, paid for in the same way as parental leave (social tax on employers), unions and employers successfully lobbied against this, citing concern for labor costs (Regeringens Proposition 1976/77). This political decision to allow a wage penalty likely makes the reduced hours policy unattractive to fathers and sends a message that fathers working reduced hours to care for children is not valued. The Social Insurance Office has also not strongly promoted fathers using reduced hours (Larsson 2011). Research by Lee et al. (2002, 7) found that a top facilitating factor for U.S. employees’ adoption of reduced work hours was “widely publicized policies and programs,” so the lack of publicity in Sweden probably reduces men’s policy use. In strong contrast, Swedish fathers’ right to parental leave provides wage-based compensation and is heavily promoted by the government (Klinth 2008).

Since parental leave legislation was amended to offer parents reduced work hours, at least four government groups have raised the issue of reducing the work week for everyone, to no avail. In the 1980s and 1990s, workday shortening was considered as a solution to high unemployment (Anxo 2009). In 2000, it was proposed as a strategy to develop a more “sustainable worklife,” reducing burnout and sick days, both costly to the welfare system and productivity (SOU 2002). In 2005, a commission debated the merits of offering “partial leave,” a temporary reduction of work hours to thirty for three years (SOU 2005). In the end, each group declined to recommend legislation, leaving work hour determination in the hands of unions. Today, most political parties regard substantially shortening hours for all workers as a low priority, although small left-wing parties still champion it.

This history of working time policy in Sweden therefore suggests that *there is little political pressure on companies to encourage fathers' use of reduced work hours*. There appears to be little willingness on the part of the government, employers or unions to contest the assumptions that men should work longer hours than women and that the economy needs to be organized around a forty-hour work week. Until recently, men have dominated groups with power to change the normative work week. There has recently been a modest gender shift in power, but so far this has not resulted in a challenge to the male model of work. While almost half of policymakers are women and women head many white-collar unions, men still dominate the powerful blue-collar unions in the important manufacturing sector and women make up only 6 percent of company CEOs (SCB 2014).

### **Are Companies under Social Pressure?—The Cultural Discourse about Fatherhood**

A second aspect of the societal context for companies' support for reduced work hours for fathers in Sweden is the cultural discourse about fatherhood. Sweden is unique in that the goal for fathers to become active in caregiving emerged early, in the 1960s. At that time, a new arrangement of gender relations became institutionalized in social policy; women and men were expected to have the same rights, obligations and opportunities to have a job and to care for home and children. In large part, equality policy was regarded as a strategy to encourage mothers to enter paid employment, to increase productivity. However, feminists and social scientists played crucial roles in the development of a vision for a society where men participated more equally in housework and childcare so that women were not oppressed by a "double role." Over time, increased attention has been paid to men's rights to be involved fathers and children's rights to be cared for by both parents (Haas and Hwang 2013b; Järvklo 2011).

The cultural discourse about fatherhood has focused on fathers taking advantage of their entitlement to share wage-based parental leave, a right established in 1974. Government campaigns and media coverage of fathers' rights to leave have been successful in helping to construct a new cultural model for men, often called a "child-oriented masculinity," whereby men are increasingly expected to develop caring attitudes and participate actively in childcare (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Johansson and Klinth 2007). The campaign has been successful in encouraging fathers to take parental leave. The vast majority of fathers (88 percent) take parental leave, for an average of ninety-one days (Duvander, Haas, and Hwang 2014).

However, the norm of a child-oriented masculinity does not include the expectation for fathers to be *equally* responsible for children's care and upbringing (Järvklo 2011). Research shows that almost all mothers and fathers agree that men should share responsibility for home and children, but parents hesitate to claim that fathers should be just as responsible for childcare as mothers



(Klarqvist and Lindström 2007). Fathers' relative share of childcare time is also not equal to mothers (Haas and Hwang 2013b), although Swedish fathers are more active in childcare than fathers in most other societies (Anderson et al. 2009; Pascall 2012). It has been suggested that the campaign for a more active fatherhood role has focused more on fathers' having greater contact and closer relations with children than on the goal of achieving gender equality (Bekkengen 2002).

Since fathers appear to have the freedom to choose how active a parent they want to be, job-related reasons can be used as acceptable rationales for fathers not being equally involved in childcare (Bekkengen 2002; Lundqvist 2012). Votinus (2008) contends that the male norm of full-time employment and the expectation that the typical working man has limited responsibility for caregiving remain uncontested assumptions in the Swedish cultural debate about shared parenthood.

Our analysis of the cultural debate about fatherhood therefore suggests that *employers are under little social pressure to facilitate fathers' reduced work hours*. There has not been a dramatic change in cultural expectations that would call for fathers to be equally responsible for childcare, so the workplace can remain structured along traditional gendered lines that assume that fathers can work full-time and have limited caregiving responsibilities.

### **Are Companies under Functional Pressure?—Fathers' Satisfaction with Work Hours**

According to Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott (2002), functional pressure on companies exists when there is recognition that serious problems result from existing organizational practices. This pressure would occur when men demonstrate an interest in sharing childcare and have difficulties doing this while conforming to typical organizational expectations based on the male model of work. Companies failing to accommodate caregiving fathers who want to reduce their work hours could have difficulties with recruitment, retention and productivity.

Swedish fathers experience stress from combining full-time employment with childcare. About half often feel they have too little time to do all that needs to be done; fathers of preschool-aged children especially feel pressure (Larsson 2011). Almost one-third never or seldom experience balance between work and family life (Nylén 2008). However, fathers do not regard reduced work hours as a solution for the problems they experience. In 2010, only 18 percent preferred a shorter work week (SCB 2012), only a slight increase from 1997 (Reynolds 2004).

Men might feel little pressure to reduce their work hours since their partners are likely to work less than full-time, allowing mothers to do more childcare. While three-fourths of women work full-time before parental leave, less than half do so immediately after parental leave. In contrast, most men (93–4 percent) work full-time before and after taking parental leave.

There can be other reasons why fathers seldom see reduced hours as desirable. Men's identities have been connected to full-time work and they might resist change that leads to loss of power and status (Bryson 2013). Fathers intent on strong involvement in childcare may find alternative ways of being involved in childcare, without reducing work hours, by using opportunities to "flex" their work hours, by cutting back on leisure time or including children in their leisure time activities (McGill 2014). Economic concerns might also impact hours preferences, since reduced hours is not associated with wage compensation. Most plausible from the perspective of gender theory, and applying the capabilities framework (as discussed by Hobson and Fahlén 2009), fathers' preferences for work hours may be shaped by the opportunities and situations at their workplaces. Fathers may become reconciled to the existing structure of work organizations based on the male model of work and fear negative job consequences if they choose to work less than full-time. In most workplaces, there is an assumption that family-friendly policies are designed for women, not men, even if they are phrased in gender-neutral terms (Smithson and Stoke 2005). While data on Swedish fathers are lacking, U.S. fathers who reduce their work hours suffer lower raises and face harsher character judgments than mothers (Coltrane et al. 2013; Vandello et al. 2013).

Until fathers feel a strong sense of entitlement to work less than full-time, companies may not need to be concerned that their failure to provide support for fathers' reduced hours will negatively affect strategic concerns of recruitment, retention and productivity. *Swedish companies therefore appear to be under little functional pressure to change organizational policies and practices to be supportive of fathers' right to reduced work hours.*

In summary, our analysis of government reports and previous research suggests that companies are under little political, social or functional pressure to support fathers' rights to reduced work hours. Our findings are in accordance with gender theory, which suggests that inequality is reinforced at multiple levels of social structure. The lack of a strong law that encourages fathers to reduce their hours and the persistence of gendered cultural norms about full-time work and parenting are likely to be formidable barriers to fathers' use of the reduced hours policy.

## The Company Study

According to den Dulk et al. (2009), companies operating within the same political and cultural environment can respond differently to pressures to adopt work-family arrangements—by conforming, making symbolic efforts to conform or resisting conformity. Our survey of private companies permits us to explore more specifically the extent to which Swedish companies conform to the law by indicating how supportive they are of the policy. In conforming

to the law, they would be demonstrating that they are moving away from the male model of work.

We conducted a mail survey of large corporations in Sweden in 2006. The sampling frame was a list of the most profitable joint-stock companies during the preceding year; we excluded companies with fewer than 100 employees. The majority of Swedish men (81 percent) are employed in the private sector (SCB 2014); of these, 41 percent work for companies with 100 or more employees (SCB 2013). Based on previous research, large private sector companies might be unsupportive of fathers' reduced hours. Larsson (2011) found that Swedish fathers were less likely to reduce work hours when working in the private sector. Fathers also take less parental leave in the private sector (Bygren and Duvander 2006).

A traditional mail survey design was used, involving mailing Swedish-language surveys to personnel officers, followed by reminder letters, surveys with new cover letters and phone calls to establish eligibility and urge response. Surveys were received from 244 companies, for a 71 percent response rate. Personnel (HR) directors were surveyed because they are typically used as informants about organizational behavior and are well informed about the entire organization (Kalleberg 1994). They have been respondents in other company studies on work-family integration (Anxo et al. 2007; den Dulk, Peters, and Poutsma 2012; Galinsky, Bond, and Sakai 2008). Nevertheless, there are limits to the reliability and validity of responses secured from single organizational representatives, particularly high-ranking ones who might feel pressure to present their companies in a favorable light.

Companies ranged in size in from 100 to 17,000 workers (median = 580). Almost half (45 percent) were manufacturing, 36 percent were service-oriented and 19 percent retail. The majority (70 percent) reported a workforce 61 percent or more men (mean = 68 percent).

### **Investigating Company Support for Fathers Working Reduced Hours**

Our study examined three aspects of support that reflect whether companies conform or resist conforming to the state's reduced hours policy: (i) the establishment of a workplace norm for fathers' use of the reduced work hours entitlement, (ii) an upward trend in fathers' use of reduced hours and (iii) a managerial role model of a father who has taken reduced hours.

Fathers' ability to reduce their work hours is likely to be affected by whether this is an already accepted practice in their companies. We examined the presence of an established norm for fathers' reduced hours by obtaining the reported proportion of fathers using reduced hours. The question read: "Legislation gives parents of small children the opportunity to reduce their work time to six hours a day without compensation. About how many fathers at your company do you think have used reduced work hours during the past

year?” (Answer categories were: 0 percent, 1–20 percent, 21–40 percent, 41–60 percent, 61–80 percent, 81–100 percent.)

In this study, following others’ examples (Fagan and Walthery 2014; Matos and Galinsky 2012), a company was judged to have laid the foundation for a new norm if at least 1 percent of employees had taken advantage of their entitlement during the last year. Two-thirds (65 percent) met this criterion. A larger proportion of fathers taking advantage of this right would send a stronger message that reducing work hours is acceptable practice. Sandor (2011) suggests that companies that offer part-time work to one-fifth or more of workers have established a more reasonable standard. In our study, only 5 percent indicated that 21 percent or more of fathers had used the policy in the previous year (see table 1).

The second way we investigated company support for fathers’ reduced hours was to discover whether companies reported an upward trend in fathers’ policy use. Even if relatively few fathers presently take advantage of this right, an upward trend suggests that the working environment is becoming more supportive.

The trend in fathers’ use of reduced hours was measured by asking, “Comparing last year to earlier years, did the number of fathers who took advantage of the reduced hours policy at your company—increase strongly, increase somewhat, neither increase or decrease, decrease somewhat or decrease strongly?” Only one-fifth indicated an upward trend, and all but one indicated the trend increased only “somewhat.” The majority (58 percent) indicated fathers’ use was unchanged; 2 percent reported a decline. One-fifth did not know.

A third way we measured company support for fathers’ reduced hours was to investigate whether a top manager had ever used the policy. This sends a message to employees that the policy is acceptable to use. The survey asked: “Has it ever happened that a man in top management at your company

**Table 1.** Company reports of fathers’ use of reduced work hours compared to parental leave<sup>(1)</sup>

Percentage indicating:	Reduced work hours	Father’s quota of parental leave
Establishment of norm—1 percent + fathers used policy last year	65	79
Establishment of widely accepted norm—21 percent + fathers used last year	4	36
Upward trend	20	64
Top manager used this policy	12	88
Average Index score	0.97	2.31

Note: (1) All differences were statistically significant, according to *t*-tests for paired samples.

reduced his work hours (not in connection with parental leave) in order to care for children?" Only 12 percent of companies reported this as true.

We developed a Reduced Hours Index by adding up responses to the three measures of company support. For example, companies reporting at least 1 percent of fathers reduced hours, an upward trend and managerial use scored the highest (three points), companies reporting none of these scored zero, while companies indicating policy support in one or two ways scored one or two points. Results suggest that only one-fourth of the companies conformed to the legislation, by indicating at least two of the three types of support. (Only nine companies showed support on all three measures.) The largest proportion (45 percent) reported only one type of support, judged as making a symbolic effort to conform to legislation. Almost one-third (31 percent) resisted conforming to the legislation, with no signs of support. Companies reported much less support for fathers reducing their work hours than they did for fathers taking two months of paid parental leave, according to results from the same survey (see table 1). Perhaps reducing work hours for a longer period during children's preschool years constitutes a more serious challenge to the male model of work than taking full-time parental leave for a few months.

In summary, as gender theory would predict, the majority of companies in our study did not demonstrate that they willingly conformed to social policy designed to promote fathers' use of reduced work hours. Results are not surprising in light of the lack of institutional and cultural support for fathers' working less than full-time.

### Exploring Correlates of Company Support for Fathers' Reduced Hours

While our survey suggests that the majority of companies were not supportive environments for fathers reducing their work hours, there was variation. The gender theory of organizations was used as the foundation for our exploration of why some companies might be more likely than others to conform to legislation when it comes to providing support for fathers' reducing their work hours. According to [Acker \(1990\)](#), company structure, policies and practices as well as everyday workplace interactions contain normative gender expectations that tend not only privilege men and disadvantage women; they also reproduce the traditional gendered division of labor for caregiving. These normative expectations include the idea that fathers' lives should center on their jobs and that they have limited caregiving responsibilities ([Brandth and Kvande 2002](#); [Hojgaard 1997](#)). These expectations are based on the assumption that work and family are still separate public and private spheres, which [Ely and Meyerson \(2000, 18\)](#) claim is "the single most pervasive gendered theme in modern organizations." We examined eight correlates of company support related to gender theory, finding four as significant correlates.

The first aspect of the gendered organizational culture hypothesized to increase company support for fathers' reduced work hours was *women's share of*

*the company workforce*. Two studies found that a more equal gender distribution of the workforce was a significant correlate of company support for reduced work hours (Bäck-Wiklund and Plantin 2007; Fagan and Walthery 2014). Companies with more women might be faced with more demands for working time adjustments for caregiving reasons and therefore provide more support for reduced hours, while a male-dominated workforce may reinforce a masculinized work culture where employees' interest in caregiving is not prioritized. Table 2 shows in our sample of largely male-dominated companies, women's workforce share was *not* correlated with the Reduced Hours Index (although one index element—managerial use—was correlated). Our study findings might differ from others because we focused on fathers, or because relatively few companies had a large female workforce.

The second aspect of organizational culture hypothesized to increase companies' support for fathers' reduced hours examined was *managerial support for fathers' work-family integration*. Traditionally, company culture has emphasized the separation of work and family, so managers supporting fathers' work-family integration goes against gendered norms. Managerial support was a significant correlate of companies' offering reduced hours in two studies (Fagan and Walthery 2014; Lee et al. 2002). Managerial support has also been found to be positively related to fathers' use of parental leave in Sweden (Haas, Allard, and Hwang 2002). Our measure was a three-item, four-point, modestly reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.60$ ) scale. Respondents were asked how true were the following statements: "Managers in general are negative toward male employees' need to spend time doing childcare"; "Top management encourages supervisors to take into account fathers' childcare responsibilities"; "When a conflict of interest arises between the job and family, managers in this company are understanding if a male employee prioritizes family." Items were coded so that higher values reflected more support. The mean (2.80) indicated that on average companies reported only slight managerial support for fathers' work-family integration. Companies reporting more managerial support did score significantly higher than others on the Reduced Hours Index and for two of the three index variables (not managerial use). Companies may express support for fathers' work-family integration without extending this entitlement to managers.

Our study considered additional features of gendered organizational culture not investigated previously. Two examined companies' willingness to move away from the male model of work. To test the hypothesis that companies rejecting the norm of men's limited caregiving responsibility would be more likely to support hours reduction, we measured *company support for equal parenthood* on a five-point scale with this question, "To what degree does your company agree with the following idea. . . . Mothers and fathers ought to contribute about equal time to child care." The mean score (3.34) indicated that on average companies reported only slight support for equal parenthood. As hypothesized, companies reporting more support for equal parenthood scored significantly higher than others on the Reduced Hours Index as well as

**Table 2.** Correlates of company support for fathers' reduced hours (Pearson correlation coefficients)

	Reduced Hours Index	Index elements		
		Company normative practice (reduced hours' use)	Trend in reduced hours' use	Reduced hours use by top manager
Gender-related factors:				
Women's share of company workforce	0.01	- 0.02	0.09	0.15*
Managerial support for fathers' work-family integration	0.15*	0.15*	0.13*	0.01
Company support for equal parenthood	0.19*	0.13*	0.04	0.14*
Company priorities concerning fathers' work-family integration	0.17*	0.20*	0.17*	0.03
Company expectations for fathers' work-family priorities	0.06	0.08	- 0.00	0.04
Company values social responsibility	0.16*	0.09	0.13*	0.10
Predicted negative consequences of increased policy use	0.01	0.02	0.07	0.08
Masculinist profit-based values	- 0.01	- 0.03	- 0.04	- 0.06
Control variables:				
Company size (log)	0.04	0.04	- 0.02	0.06
Company branch: service	0.08	0.07	0.04	0.06
Company branch: production	- 0.06	- 0.05	- 0.04	- 0.04
Company branch: retail	- 0.02	- 0.02	0.00	- 0.02

\* $p \leq 0.05$  for a one-tailed test.

two index elements (but not trend). Companies' support for equal parenthood may need to be higher if it is to change the culture enough to experience a significant increase in the proportion of fathers choosing to reduce their work hours.

To test the hypothesis that companies rejecting the ideal worker norm would be more likely to support fathers' use of reduced hours, we measured *company expectations for men's work-family priorities* with a five-point, four-item scale with modest reliability ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ). Respondents were asked to "Indicate to what extent your company agrees with the following statements: (i) For men, the job ought to come before family, (ii) Men with the ambition to advance within the company ought to be able to work overtime when it is demanded; (iii) Men who take off from work now and then to care for their children are not sufficiently committed to the job; (iv) The most productive employees prioritize the job over the family." Responses were coded so that a higher score meant companies expected men to prioritize family over job. The mean score (4.01) suggested companies tended to agree that men should prioritize family somewhat, reflecting agreement with the cultural discourse on caring fatherhood. This measure, however, was not related to the Reduced Hours Index or its elements. There appears to be a substantial gap between company principle and practice here.

Two hypotheses concerned company priorities. We hypothesized that *companies prioritizing fathers' work-family integration* as a strategic business concern would be more likely to support men's use of reduced hours. This would be in contrast to traditional gendered norms within organizations that call for family and work to remain separate, especially for men. Company representatives were asked how much their companies emphasized several business priorities on a three-point scale, including: "fathers' ability to combine work and family." Among the priorities studied (productivity, cost reduction, morale, recruitment, stress reduction, lower absenteeism, more women in management) it scored the lowest, with a mean of 1.82, suggesting very slight support. Companies indicating that fathers' work-family integration was a higher company priority were significantly more likely than others to report higher scores on the Reduced Hour Index, and for two of three index elements (but not managerial use).

Another feature of organizational culture connected to gender that was hypothesized to be related to company support for fathers' reduced work hours was *companies' valuing social responsibility*, a priority traditionally associated with women and a value associated with rejecting the separation of family and work. Company representatives were asked how much their companies emphasized several values, in comparison to other companies in their branch, on a five-point scale, including "taking social responsibility." The average score (3.66) indicated the majority portrayed companies as somewhat socially responsible. As expected, companies that emphasized social responsibility were significantly more likely than others to support fathers' use of



reduced hours according to the results for the Reduced Hours Index but for only one index element (trend). The latter measure, like that for social responsibility, might be susceptible to social desirability, since it would be easier to report an upward trend than report actual policy use.

Another set of possible correlates related to a masculinist profit-based organizational culture. As mentioned above, it has often been assumed in Sweden that companies have something economic to lose if they support policies that undermine the male model of work. In this study, we hypothesized that companies assuming *negative economic consequences of more fathers taking reduced hours* would be less supportive. On a five-point scale, companies were asked: “If substantially more fathers at your company would reduce their work hours every day or every week in order to take care of their children, what economic consequences would this have for your company?” The mean (3.43) indicated that companies on average predicted somewhat negative consequences from more fathers reducing hours. Expecting negative economic consequences, however, was not related to company support for fathers’ use of the policy.

We looked further at a more indirect way of determining if business concerns about profit might impact company stance on fathers’ reduced hours. We hypothesized that companies exhibiting *profit-based values*—that can clash with the goals of a caring society—would show less support. A reliable scale ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ) was formed with five items measured on a five-point scale, by asking respondents how much their companies emphasized the following, in comparison to other companies in their branch: “places profits before everything else,” “is competitive,” “prioritizes organizational goals,” “has an aggressive attitude” and “sets high demands for performance.” The average score (3.35) indicated the majority of companies presented themselves as having somewhat—but not strongly—masculinist profit-based values. However, companies with these values were no less likely than others to show support for fathers’ use of reduced work hours. Perceived economic barriers to company support for fathers’ hour reduction appear to be relatively unimportant compared to cultural barriers.

Two additional variables were included in the analysis. Previous studies found larger companies were more likely to accept employees reducing work hours (Fagan and Walthery 2014; Matos and Galinsky, 2012; Reidman, 2006; Sandor 2011), presumably because they can absorb costs involved in flexible work arrangements. Thus we hypothesized that *company size* (number of employees) would correlate with company support, but it did not. Size may have made less difference in our sample that excluded smaller workforces.

Lastly, we investigated whether *company sector* (service, retail, manufacturing) affected company acceptance of reduced hours. Each sector has different operating requirements and marketing conditions that may impact willingness to support flexible work. Because European companies in the service sector have been found to be more likely than others to permit employees to

temporarily reduce work hours (Fagan and Walthery 2014), we hypothesized that service sector companies would be more supportive of fathers' reduced hours. Overall, companies in the service sector were not significantly more likely than others to score higher on the Reduced Hours Index or its constituent elements. However, seven of the nine companies with the highest scores on the index were service companies.

Most measures of gendered organizational culture were significantly inter-correlated (see table 3). All hypothesized correlates of company support for fathers' use of reduced hours were considered simultaneously in a multiple regression analysis to see which had the strongest, independent relationships with the Reduced Hours Index and its elements, controlling for the effects of all others. The only measure remaining as a significant independent predictor of the Reduced Hours Index was company support for a new norm of equal parenthood (see table 4). This suggests that company acceptance of the radical concept that fathers have equal caregiving responsibilities with mothers may be a crucial step in facilitating fathers' use of the reduced hours policy. The male model of work includes the norm of limited caregiving, so acceptance of the model for equal parenthood dramatically challenges this important norm that is deeply embedded in gendered organizational culture. Government efforts to promote the equal parenthood norm could impact company practice in the long-term. Companies reporting support for equal parenthood were significantly likely to also report managerial support for working fathers, prioritize fathers' work-family integration, expect fathers to put family before work and value social responsibility (see table 3). These may constitute important features of a father-supportive organizational culture that needs to be explored further.

In regard to the specific index elements, equal parenthood advocacy was a significant independent correlate of normative practice and male managers' policy use. Women's share of the company workforce also remained as an independent significant predictor of manager policy use. For the index element measuring trends, company expectations for fathers' work-family priorities remained a significant independent predictor.

Overall, measures predicted little variance (2–3 percent) in companies' support for fathers taking reduced hours, so it is important to look further to understand why some companies are more supportive than others. Since variables associated with gender theory were significantly related to company support, it would be worthwhile to explore this theory further.

In summary, our study suggests that the gendered culture of private companies may be an important barrier to company support for fathers' use of reduced hours. Traditional economic concerns, company size and sector did not affect company support. Our findings contribute to a growing body of literature regarding how the gendered culture of work organizations impacts men's ability to take advantage of policies that might help them combine work and family life. For example, Bloksgaard (2012) and Murgia and Poggio (2013)

Table 3. Descriptive data and correlations for independent variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Women's share of workforce	31.52	18.22										
2. Managerial support for fathers' work-family integration	2.80	0.49	0.05									
3. Company priorities concerning fathers' work-family integration	1.82	0.66	0.09	0.38*								
4. Company support for equal parenthood	3.36	1.28	0.08	0.35*	0.21*							
5. Company expectations for fathers' work-family priorities	4.01	0.73	-0.00	0.39*	0.15*	0.30*						
6. Company values social responsibility	3.66	0.77	-0.02	0.35*	0.26*	0.14*	0.17*					
7. Predicted negative consequences of increased use	3.43	0.63	-0.17*	-0.22*	-0.04	-0.07	-0.16*	-0.11*				
8. Masculinist profit-based culture	3.35	0.59	0.08	0.04	-0.03	0.01	0.19*	0.25*	0.14*			
9. Company size (log)	1310	2245	-	0.05	0.09	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.09	-0.13*		
10. Branch-service	1.36	0.48	0.20*	0.13*	-0.01	0.19*	0.18*	0.06	0.20*	-0.17*	0.02	
11. Branch-production	1.45	0.50	-0.35*	-0.09	0.01	-0.15*	0.01	0.00	-0.08	0.07	0.06	-0.68

\* $p \leq 0.05$  for a one-tailed test.

**Table 4.** Multiple regression results—factors associated with company support for fathers' reduced hours (standardized beta coefficients)

	Reduced Hours Index	Index elements		
		Company normative practice (reduced hours' use)	Trend in reduced hours' use	Reduced hours use by top manager
Gender-related factors:				
Women's share of company workforce	- 0.01	- 0.04	- 0.10	0.16*
Managerial support for fathers	0.03	0.05	0.09	- 0.10
Company support for equal parenthood	0.15*	0.16*	- 0.02	0.15*
Company priorities concerning fathers' work-family integration	0.10	0.06	0.12*	0.02
Company expectations for fathers' work-family priorities	- 0.03	0.00	- 0.05	- 0.01
Company values social responsibility	0.12	0.05	0.10	0.10
Predicted negative economic consequences of increased policy use	- 0.05	- 0.05	- 0.08	0.04
Masculinist profit-based values	0.04	0.05	0.06	- 0.04
Control variables:				
Company size (log)	0.05	0.05	- 0.03	0.07
Company branch: service	- 0.06	0.04	0.06	0.02
Company branch: production	- 0.01	- 0.02	- 0.04	0.05
Adjusted R-square	0.03*	0.02	0.02	0.02

\* $p \leq 0.05$  for a one-tailed test.

found fathers' negotiations in regard to taking legislated parental leave were impacted by gendered expectations within organizations in Denmark and Italy. In the United States, [Gatrell and Cooper \(2008\)](#) and [Kelly et al. \(2010\)](#) discovered that the gendered work culture discouraged men from using employer-providing flexibility arrangements.

## Conclusion

A government policy granting fathers the opportunity to reduce weekly work hours to thirty while children are young could be important for promoting gender equality and enhancing men's work-family integration. Several nations offer fathers this entitlement; however, fathers' capabilities of taking advantage of this have received little research attention. This study focuses on Sweden, a society that officially promotes gender equality in the workplace and family life and was the first to offer reduced work hours to fathers. Although it is common for Swedish mothers to reduce work hours after parental leave, few fathers take advantage of this right. Our investigation suggests that an important reason for this is that private company support for fathers' use of the reduced hours policy seems weak. Few companies reported a norm that more than 20 percent of fathers reduced their work hours, few experienced an upward trend in reduced hours policy use and most had never had a male manager reduce his hours.

There appear to be three interrelated causes for companies' lack of support for fathers using the reduced hours policy. First, there is a lack of pressure from the institutional environment, where assumptions about full-time work and men's responsibility for childcare are not challenged by policymakers or unions. Use of the right to reduced work hours is also discouraged by lack of wage-based compensation and attention to fathers' right to this in information campaigns. At present, the government and unions seem more interested in promoting mothers' full-time employment than fathers' reduced hours, reinforcing the male model of work.

Fathers' opportunities to reduce hours are further constrained by a cultural context where men's lack of equal responsibility for childcare is taken for granted, which could reinforce the traditional company expectation that male workers have limited caregiving responsibilities. The larger cultural discourse aimed at encouraging fathers to increase their involvement with children also does not address barriers to this in company culture.

The third obstacle appears to be the gendered culture of work organizations. Even assuming representatives presented their companies in an overly positive light, company support for men as active fathers appeared only lukewarm. Less managerial support for fathers' work-family integration, less support for equal parenthood, low prioritizing of fathers' work-family integration and less concern for social responsibility were all factors associated with low support

for fathers' reduced work hours. Of these, lack of support for equal parenthood appeared to make the most difference.

Findings suggest that company support for fathers' reduced hours might improve in the future. Since economic concerns were not a substantial barrier to company support, over time a "business case" might be made that reduced hours promotes organizational commitment and productivity of a new generation of men committed to active parenthood. Progressive companies in certain sectors, such as the seven service companies that scored highest in support for fathers' use of the reduced hours policy, may influence others as each strives to recruit and retain the best talent (den Dulk 2001).

This study has limitations in helping us understand the conditions under which companies might be supportive of fathers' reduced work hours. It takes place in a society where labor standards are strongly enforced and where long hours are not the norm. Future research needs to consider a wider array of countries, including those where long hours are the norm, to see if work hour reduction is easier to facilitate when long hours are commonplace. Also, our study does not allow us to understand the processes by which companies become supportive of fathers' caregiving. Surveys are of limited use in understanding the dynamics of organizational change, so in-depth case studies are needed. Understanding these dynamics can provide important information to policymakers and managers that could increase the likelihood of successful implementation of a policy that has the potential to increase fathers' time to care and enhance gender equality.

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