

**The Danish leave-of-absence schemes -
Origins, functioning and effects from a gender perspective**

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1. Introduction

By January 1, 1994, Denmark introduced a new labour market reform. The reform included several new leave-of-absence schemes, encouraging members of the labour force to take educational leave, sabbatical leave, or leave for childcare. The structuration of the schemes is presented in Table 1.

The general purpose of the schemes was to reduce unemployment by means of job-rotation and work-sharing in the labour market, i.e., to redistribute the burdens of unemployment, hoping that vacancies generated by the schemes would be filled with unemployed people (Madsen, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Olsen, 2000:100). Another purpose was to improve the qualifications of the work force (Landsarbejdsraadet, 1998:156). This especially applied to the scheme for educational leave that would improve the opportunities for life long learning. However, the schemes for sabbatical and leave for child care also contain an educational dimension. That is, in as much as the schemes create job-openings, they will make it possible for unemployed people to improve their skills by means of 'on-the-job-training' in ordinary jobs. In effect these people will become more employable. Finally, the purpose was, at the individual and family level, to improve the individual welfare by relieving the time pressure on families with small children (Andersen & Larsen, 1995:83).

The Danish leave schemes have attracted much attention - internationally as well nationally, among other things because they also comprise unemployed people. The interest for the Danish schemes became manifest at the European Union Summit in Essen in December 1994, where Jacques Delors pointed to the Danish leave schemes as a visionary measure worth imitating in other European countries. In Denmark, the debate has been both scientific and political.

In the scientific debate in Denmark, it has been argued that the leave schemes to some extent mirror the ideas of Andre Gorz. It is argued that the leave schemes constitute new solidary relationships between the employed and unemployed part of the work force (e.g. Boje, 1998:359), while the sabbatical leave scheme in particular has been interpreted as a first step towards citizen income (e.g. Andersen & Larsen, 1995). Citizen income can be defined as the general right of all citizens to receive from the state sufficient support to maintain a modest standard of material living, without any general obligation to make themselves available to the labour market (Christensen, 1999:14). As such, the sabbatical leave scheme has paved the way for legitimate 'non-work'.

Table 1: The Danish leave-of-absence schemes: 1994

	Educational leave	Sabbatical leave	Leave for child care for children between 0-8
Groups eligible for the leave arrangements	- employed - unemployed - self-employed	- employed	- employed - unemployed - self-employed
Duration	1-52 weeks	1-52 weeks (1)	1-26 weeks (2)/52 weeks (3)
Eligibility criteria	Eligible for unemployment benefit	Eligible for unemployment benefit	Eligible for sickness benefit or maternity leave benefit
Age criteria	+25 years	+25 years	-
Other criteria			Not eligible for public day care
Employer obliged to replace the person on leave with another person	No	Yes (4)	No
Employees can freely choose to take the leave?	No, the employment service must accept applicants educational plans	No, needs acceptance from employer	Yes
Benefits in per cent of unemployment benefit (5)	100	80 (6)	80 (7)

- Notes: (1) In 1995 the minimum duration of sabbatical leave was raised to 13 weeks
(2) From 1995 the duration of the leave scheme was reduced to 13 weeks if the child was older than one year. Simultaneously, the minimum duration of leave for child care was raised from 1 to 13 weeks.
(3) Employed persons are granted leave for 26 weeks, while unemployed persons may be granted up to 52 weeks leave provided acceptance by the public employment service
(4) From 1995 the requirement to substitute people on leave must be met by employing long-termed unemployed, i.e., the substitute must have been unemployed for more than 52 weeks
(5) By January 2000 unemployment benefits amount to DKK 2,850 a week (about 382 Euro)
(6) In 1995 reduced to 70%, and in 1997 reduced to 60%
(7) In 1995 reduced to 70%, and in 1997 reduced to 60%

In the political debate on the leave schemes, the gender perspective has played a prominent role. The female Minister of Labour, Jytte Andersen, who introduced the leave schemes, argued that she was ‘very concerned as to how we create a labour market which is sufficiently flexible to offer different opportunities for men and women at different stages in life - without consequences in terms of career opportunities, seniority, income and pension’ (Politiken, 31 July 1994). From this perspective Jytte Andersen argues that the leave schemes are a ‘historical breakthrough’ in the current debate on gender equality (Politiken, 31 July 1994).

Based on the above, the purpose of this article is to evaluate whether the leave schemes in the Danish context constraint or aggravate gender inequality. In order to fulfill this purpose, we have posed ourselves the following questions: Was the primary purpose of the schemes to combat unemployment or to further gender equality? Who are using the schemes? Do men and women use the schemes equally? What are the effects of the schemes? Do they contribute to reproduce or re-structure gender relations? Answering these questions leads to the concluding discussion in which we claim that in their current shape and use the schemes are retrogressive in terms of gender equality in Denmark.

2. The Use of Leave Schemes

At the time when the leave schemes were introduced the rate of unemployment was high and still growing. Unemployment had been growing since the mid-1980s and peaked in 1993 with about 350,000 registered unemployed persons or 12.4% of the labour force. In the early 1990s the problem of unemployment increased, that is, the ‘problem pressure’ became serious. Furthermore, in January 1993 the Social Democrats regained power after 10 years out of office. The Social Democrats had regained power by promising that they would commit themselves to fight unemployment. Therefore, the government was under political pressure to solve the problems of unemployment.

In order to relieve the ‘problem pressure’ and the political pressure it became obvious that one solution would be to introduce the new leave schemes. Leave schemes as problem solving instruments are cheap or cost neutral. In part because sabbatical leave and leave for child care only amounted to 80% of unemployment benefit, and in part because the public saved the costs of day care institutions in connection with leave for child care. And the success of the leave schemes was instantaneous.

Table 2: Workforce, unemployment and the number on leave in Denmark in the 90's

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Workforce (total)	2.908.303	2.895.950	2.872.093	2.863.330	2.868.307	2874419
Unemployed (total)	323.437	278.854	223.285	193.672	168.993	132179
On leave (average annual participants)						
- Overall	50.845	82.116	62.900	46.709	42.944	34.201
-Sabbatical	2.783	7.480	998	599	463	107
- Childcare	35.791	42.135	30.580	22.228	19.624	20.269
- Education	12.272	35.502	31.412	23.882	22.856	13.826

Source: Danmarks Statistik (1996:1, 1998:2, 2000a:44, 2000b:2)

Table 2 shows that already in 1995 approx. 82,000 people were on leave. As the table shows whole-year persons on leave, it tends to conceal the actual number of people utilizing the schemes. In 1995, for example, 150,000 were on leave for shorter or longer periods. And in the period 1994-1995 the average leave amounted to 258 days for persons on leave for child care, 184 days for educational leave, and 222 days for sabbatical leave (Andersen et al, 1996:50 Table 3.8). However, Table 2 also shows that since 1995, the utilization of all three leave schemes has dropped dramatically, especially the sabbatical scheme². The development in use of the leave schemes follows the rate of unemployment, that is, the drop in usage of leave schemes corresponds to the drop in unemployment rates. But the drop in use of the schemes is also due to the fact that they are gradually becoming less attractive in terms of the level of compensation. This applies especially to the sabbatical leave and leave for child care schemes that were changed in 1995 and in 1997 concurrently with falling rates of unemployment.

The extensive use of the leave schemes is bound to have had an impact on overall unemployment. In 1999, for example, 36% of the persons on leave were unemployed. But the schemes have also indirectly affected unemployment in that 64% of persons on leave in 1999 were employed prior to taking leave. (Danmarks Statistik, 2000b:4). Furthermore, the estimate

² The drop in utilization of sabbatical leave is undoubtedly caused by sabbatical being conditioned by the employment of substitute labor, and from 1995 this type of labor had to have been unemployed for at least 52 weeks.

is that approx. 63% of persons on leave from jobs are replaced by substitute labour (Andersen et al, 1996:21). In general, it is assumed that unemployment was reduced with 33-40,000 persons in 1994 and with 60-70,000 persons in 1995 due to the leave schemes.

Nevertheless the job-rotation effects have been modest, since only few vacancies have been filled with long-term unemployed (TemaNord, 1996:25; Andersen et al, 1996:22). Almost half of the substitute labour was employed prior to taking jobs as substitute labour, and only 13% of the substitute labour has been unemployed for more than three months (Madsen, 1998a:6). The reason is, of course, that it is often very difficult to find a long-term unemployed with the right qualifications to substitute a person on leave.

The leave schemes may have favoured the labour market situation of women as the composition of the persons on leave is highly gender biased.

Table 3 Share of persons (per cent) who have taken leave according to gender

	1994		1995		1996		1997		1998		1999	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Over-all	15	85	19	81	18	82	17	83	16	84	14	86
Sabbat	29	71	37	63	31	69	34	66	34	66	32	68
Child care	8	92	9	91	7	93	7	93	7	93	7	93
Edu-cation	31	69	29	71	28	72	25	75	24	76	24	76

Source: Danmarks Statistik (1996:1, 1998:2, 2000b:2)

Table 3 shows considerable gender difference in use of leave schemes, and since 1995 the gender inequality has been aggravated. However, if we neglect the sabbatical leave, which only a few people have made use of, several interpretation are possible. The over representation of women on educational leave could imply that primarily women have used the opportunity for further education. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean that women have strengthened their position in the labour market inasmuch as educational leave does not have to be oriented toward vocational training, but can encompass general education and personal development. But there is no doubt that the great over representation of women on leave for child care reflect the traditional division of labour between the sexes. The fact that only

approx. 7% of persons on leave for child care are men clearly indicates that this scheme functions to reproduce the traditional idea that women are main responsible for rearing children.

Furthermore, it should be noted that it is particular segments of the female workforce that use the leave schemes. That is, about 60% of the employed taking leave are from the public sector (Madsen, 1998a) and these are especially nurses, social workers, and pre-school teachers. None of these occupations are hierarchically organized, i.e., they contain no career ladders why there is no risk by taking leave. But the leave schemes have also had several unintended consequences: First, especially the scheme for leave for child care has contributed to the marginalization of women in the labour market. This is due to the fact that many long-term unemployed single mothers have taken leave for child care thus reducing future possibilities of being fully integrated into the labour market (Olsen, 1997:44; TemaNord, 1996:26; Pedersen, 1996). Second, three-fourths of persons on leave have taken on a larger share of household work (Andersen et al, 1996:16). As primarily women are using the leave schemes they have consequently helped reproducing the traditional division of labour within the families.

3. Contradictions in the Labour Market Policies - and Their Effects

In order to understand the formation and development of the leave schemes in the 1990s it must be emphasized that the schemes formed part of a major labour market reform in Denmark. The so-called Zeuthen Commission prepared the labour market reform in 1994, and its mandate was to develop new policy instruments for combatting the structural imbalances and wage-drifts in the labour market. It was only in the last minute, i.e., just before the commission submitted its recommendations to the government, that den political consultative group dictated the commission to include the leave schemes in its recommendations. Nonetheless, the general purpose of the 1994 reform was to improve the smooth functioning of the labour market, and it is not hard to imagine that the leave schemes have been counter productive for such purposes.

Soon after the implementation of the 1994 reform, the leave schemes gave rise to structural imbalances and bottleneck problems, especially in the public sector, that is in the social and health care sector, and partly in the primary and secondary school. What was needed was

nurses, pre-school teachers, social and health workers, midwives, physiotherapists, secretaries and school teachers (Landsarbejdsraadet, 1997, 1999). Therefore, the Employers' Association started to attack the leave schemes. They demanded that leave for child care should be conditioned by acceptance of the employer (Politiken 6 October 1994). And leading economists argued that if unemployment continued to fall, it would be necessary to re-consider the possibilities of maintaining the leave schemes (e.g. Niels Kaergaard, member of the Economic Council, in Politiken, 6 October 1994).

Also the Minister of Labour began to retreat. She argued that county authorities, which are responsible for the health care sector, should think twice before allowing nurses to use the leave schemes. Also, she developed ideas for how to make access to leave schemes more selective, depending on the employment situation in industrial and economic sectors. In other words, eligibility for leave schemes should be made dependent on the state of unemployment in each occupation, which could lead to that nurses, for instance, could be made in-eligible for the schemes. These ideas were not, however, implemented.

Nonetheless, the outcome of the ideas was that it was made less attractive to take leave in 1995 and 1996 in order to increase the supply of labour (Landsarbejdsraadet, 1997; Arbejdsministeriet, 1999:16). And, finally, in 1999, the sabbatical leave scheme was abandoned. That is, as soon the employment situation changed, the Ministry of Labour, Jytte Andersen, abandoned her own idea of leave schemes being a 'historical breakthrough' in the debate about gender equality and focussed the debate on the economy of bottleneck problems. In other words, the content and structuration of the leave schemes were subsumed the concern for overall employment and the structural imbalances in the labour market.

The drastic and negative feedback effects in relation to bottleneck problems were undoubtedly caused by the combinations of especially women using the schemes and the widespread horizontal and vertical gender division of labour in Denmark. (OECD, 1988:148 Chart. 5.10). The Employers' Association has been aware of this problem since the mid-1980s and fears that within a few years the gender division of labour will result in a heavy deficit of labour (men) in the industry due to demographic changes. Therefore, in the mid-1980s the Employers' Association launched the campaign 'women in male professions', which was a total failure undoubtedly due to women being strongly oriented towards and deeply rooted in specific types of jobs. Certain feminists have criticized the campaign for reflecting disrespect of women's dispositions and choice of vocation. The campaign did not reflect that women's choice of vocation and focus on jobs involving the care of others is a function of their socialization and

preference structure. Women are justified in choosing vocations in which they can use their positive properties, such as helpfulness and paying attention to others. (e.g. Kuehn, 1988).

4. The Danish Model for Combining Wage Work and Motherhood

Together with the other Nordic countries, Denmark has the highest female participation rate in the labour market in the industrialized countries. In this context, maternity leave schemes are assumed to be of decisive importance for women being able to maintain their integration in the labour market. However, maternity leave of long duration is not the only means to overcome the juxtaposition between wage work and motherhood. During the period 1970-1981 the female participation rate in Denmark rose from 58,0 to 71,8 in spite of very meagre maternity arrangements:

- till 1980 maternity leave was 14 weeks;
- in 1981 maternity leave was increased to 18 weeks, granting women the right to take leave four weeks prior to birth and 14 weeks after;
- in 1984 paternity leave of two weeks was introduced and a parental leave scheme of 10 weeks. If the husband and wife choose not to share the parental leave, the mother is entitled to the 10 weeks;
- and in 1992 a set of rules was introduced according to which parents with children under nine were granted the possibility for taking leave under certain circumstances. However these rules were replaced in 1994 by the leave for child care schemes covering people with children between 0-8.

Despite maternity leave schemes having been improved in 1981, 1984, and 1994/94 the female participation rate has only grown modestly from 71.8 to 75.1 between 1981-97. In this context it should be emphasized that Danish women do no attempt to combine participation in the labour market with motherhood by working part-time. In 1997, for instance, only 9% of all women worked less than 15 hours a week.

In Denmark, the juxtaposition between wage work and motherhood has been solved by means of day care institutions. In 1998, for instance, 55% of all children between 0-2 years of age were enrolled in day care institutions. In Denmark, there is a long historical tradition for using day care facilities to mobilize women for the labour market (Olsen, 2000:74 cont.). As such,

day care institutions have contributed to the formation of interests among women. In the Danish context, most feminists are in favour of day care institutions, as they believe that maternity leave of long duration will have the effects that

- human capital investments will become out-dated
- job experiences will get lost
- there is a risk of career stop or career set back
- lead to social isolation
- employers will develop statistical discrimination as they will become reluctant to recruit women of childbearing age.

Actually, when the duration of the maternity leave was extended in the early 1980s, feminists and the then chair of the Council of Equality, Grete Fenger Moeller (Olsen, 2000:93), resisted it. Similarly, a young feminist has recently argued that the duration of leave schemes ought to be cut down in order to avoid that women are placed outside the labour market for longer periods (Olsen, 1997:34).

The high coverage of day care institutions does not mean that there are sufficient day care institutions, the waiting lists are long. Actually, it has been argued that the leave for child care scheme is a measure to relieve pressure on the day care system. 28% of all women with children between 0-2 years of age use the leave for child care. 20% of all women on leave with children below 1 year of age felt that they have been forced to take the leave due to the insufficient number of child care institutions (Andersen et.al, 1996:15). In other words, the leave for child care scheme compensates for the deficient number of day care institutions, and contributes to relieve pressure from long waiting lists (Olsen, 2000:100). Therefore, we may hypothesize that for many women leave for child care is not an option, as they are forced to use the scheme when they have no possibility of getting the child into a day care institution.

5. Perspectives and Conclusion

Birgit Pfau-Effinger (1998) distinguishes between different gender cultural models, each of which refers to different conceptions of gender equality. In order to conceptualize the Danish situation and the Danish lines of development, we will be applying a section of Pfau-Effinger's cultural models. It includes: (1) The male breadwinner/female part-time career

model in which both man and wife are integrated in the labour market, but it is the women who during phases of motherhood attempt to combine child care and wage work, e.g., by long maturity leave, part-time work, etc. (2) The dual breadwinner/state career model in which both sexes are fully integrated in the employment system. In this model, the caring of children is not primarily seen as the task of the family, but to a considerable extent the task of the welfare state by means of public day care institutions. (3) The dual breadwinner/dual career model: This model reflects the notion of a symmetrical and equitable integration of both genders into society. In contrast to the preceding model, child rearing in the family is equally distributed among husband and wife. This is only possible because the labour market is structurally organized in a way that allows parents to fulfil a 'dual responsibility' in relation to domestic work and rearing small children.

Based on Pfau-Effinger's model constructions Denmark can be classified as a dual breadwinner/state career model. The question is, however, whether the leave schemes of 1994 contribute toward a male breadwinner/female part-time career model? The hypothesis rests on the following observations:

- the introduction of the leave schemes was embedded in the rhetoric of equality, but the actual purpose was to reduce unemployment. In this sense the leave schemes should be viewed as an attempt to camouflage the actual extent of unemployment. This view is further supported by the subsequent decrease in the quality of the schemes (the sabbatical scheme was entirely abandoned) as the employment situation improved;

- women hold positions in the labour market from which they, due to the vertical and horizontal gender division of labour, can take leave without losing career opportunities. Consequently it will, more or less automatically, be the women who 'carry' the costs of attempts to reduce unemployment by letting themselves retire from the labour market periodically. In this perspective it is also noticeable that men using the leave for child care scheme usually are working in occupations dominated by women. (Olsen, 1997:46)

- gender differences in use of the leave schemes reflect pronounced expectations of maternity and paternity (Aunbirk, 1993). In that women occupy positions in the family that ascribe to them the main responsibility for rearing and caring for children, they will also be the ones that more or less automatically are forced to take leave due to insufficient number of day care institutions. The gender conditioned wage differentiation supports this tendency. The family's

decrease in income due to leave will be less if the mother takes leave rather than the father. (Olsen, 1997:45)

- the current leave schemes have contributed to marginalise long-term unemployed single mothers, and to restore the traditional gender division of domestic tasks in the family

- the leave schemes have been introduced across feminist interests. The feminists fear that long-term absence from the labour market may result in that human capital investments become obsolete, job experiences will be lost, etc. In other words, rather than improving the coverage in accordance with the interests of Danish feminists, a leave for child care scheme has been introduced that in reality functions as a superstructure to the maternity leave schemes.

However, a quite different discourse has been emerging in Denmark. This discourse is about equality in the household and equality in the caring for small children. Here, focus is on the fact that men are not using the paternity and parental leave schemes introduced in 1984 (Carlsen, 1993). Therefore it is argued, making it compulsory for men to take paternity leave might help developing new identities among men pointing towards a dual breadwinner/dual career model. But many are of the perception that the leave schemes of 1994 will obstruct this development. For example the then chair of the Council of Equality, Anne Grete Holmsgaard, said in 1994, that the leave for child care schemes will help to make it even more difficult to make men take parental leave (Berlingske Tidende 27 November 1994).

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