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The role of ideas in parenting leaves – the case of gender equality and its politicisation in Finland

Mikael Nygård & Josefine Nyby

Abstract

Ideas play a central role in shaping social and public policy, and this is certainly the case when it comes to family policy in general and to parenting leaves in particular. The past half century or so, various ideas have influenced e.g., how parenting leave systems ought to be shaped. One such idea is that of gender equality advocating equality between parents in terms of how they use of leave rights. However, what this idea actually means in practice and how to implement it in policy terms, varies between different contexts and over time. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the role of ideas in parenting leave policies and, in particular, to highlight how the idea of gender equality can be understood. We seek to do this on a more general level, but also by exemplifying how different interpretations of such an idea have been politicised in Finnish parenting leave policy and discourses.

INTRODUCTION

During the 2000s, the question as to how ideas influence and shape policy received an increasing attention among social scientists (Béland, 2019). This is not only true for social policy in general, but also for specific policy areas such as parenting leave policy. An example of such an idea is *gender equality*, which has mainly been associated with the ambition to create equality between women and men, both on the labour market and within the family. In the Nordic countries, that is in the dual-earner/carer model, gender equality has been considered integral by providing opportunities for working mothers to take up paid work, and later also caring opportunities for fathers (Leira, 2006). Accordingly, since the 1970s, the Nordic countries have invested in both individualised parenting leave systems, and in universal early childhood education and care systems enabling parents to return to work after the paid parenting leave period ends (Lammi-Taskula, in this volume). During the 2000s, this became increasingly influential in European traditional male-breadwinner models, such as Germany

(Fagnani, 2012), and it could therefore be understood as a ‘travelling idea’ or ‘policy transfer’ (see e.g., Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Stone, 2003) across family policy systems (see e.g., Blum, 2014; Windwehr & Fischer, 2020).

However, the implementation of various gender equality ideas within parenting leave and childcare policies has not looked the same across the Nordic countries, nor has the meaning of this idea or the discourses related to it been unanimous or undisputed. While Sweden and Denmark have been frontrunners in supporting working mothers, Norway and Finland have also nurtured the idea of parental choice through cash-for-care benefits (Duvander & Ellingsæter, 2016; Nyby et al., 2017). Moreover, notions of the family and gender roles are culturally situated. For instance, survey data shows that Finnish mothers tend to have more traditional attitudes towards family roles (Weckström, 2014) and to be less enthusiastic about the idea of equal division of paid and unpaid work (Ylikännö et al., 2016). This suggests that while the idea of gender equality has indeed been influential for parenting leave and childcare policies, it has been politicised and implemented in different ways in different countries. However, this is something that is often overseen in research on parenting leave policy.

Therefore, the *aim of this chapter* is to discuss the role of ideas within parenting leave policy both on a general level and on a more specific level by focussing on how the idea of gender equality has been understood, politicised and contested in contemporary parenting leave policy in a Finnish context. By doing so, the chapter contributes to the literature on ideas within parenting leave policy, but it also offers a deeper understanding of the different layers of gender equality and how these have been politicised and contested in the policymaking process.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, we discuss ideas and their role for parenting leave policy on a general level and identify a number of ideas that have been influential within this particular policy area. Then, we turn our attention to the idea of gender equality and varying ways of understanding this idea in parenting leave policy. In the penultimate section, we use

Finland as an example for a discussion about how different principles inherent in the gender equality idea have influenced parenting policy. Since Finland uses a cash-for-care benefit (the child home care allowance; Fi. *Kotihoidin tuki*) for parents that care for children under three years in their homes after the statutory parenting leave ends, the discussion about gender equality also indirectly has bearing for this particular benefit. In the final section, we conclude our discussion.

IDEAS AND THEIR ROLE IN SOCIAL POLICY

Since the beginning of the 2000s, social scientists have increasingly acknowledged the role of ideas and discourses in social policy alongside structural or actor-based theories (Béland & Cox, 2010; Béland, 2019; Blyth, 2013). According to the ideational perspective, ideas do not only help policymakers to make sense of the social world and to understand different social problems, but they also present solutions to such problems and thus constitute a central element of the policymaking process (Béland, 2010; Hulme, 2005), including processes of policy transfer to other jurisdictions.

What, then, is an idea? While the concept of ideas is frequently used, there is no universal definition of what ideas actually are. This term may refer to different things, from ideas on how to solve a particular problem to more general views on the role that the state, the family and the market ought to have for the production of welfare (Harrison & Boyd, 2003). Vivien Schmidt (2008, p. 306) offers useful help here by distinguishing between three main categories of ideas: specific policy ideas, general ideas, and ‘world views’. While policy ideas offer a solution to a certain problem, general ideas and ‘world views’ are wider ideational constructions on society, economics or politics, and they also often offer some kind of normative justification for specific policy ideas. As an example, ‘privatisation’ can be understood as a specific policy idea, which is related to a general idea on the supremacy of the

market in the production of social welfare in accordance with a neo-liberal ‘world view’ or ideology (cf. Taylor, 2007). A similar view is held by Peter Hall, who sees ideas as related to policy paradigms. These paradigms contain both policy goals and the instruments to reach these goals, but they also describe the very nature of the challenge the policies are meant to address (Hall, 1993).

How, then, do ideas become influential in policymaking? Put simply, there are at least two ways in which this can take place. The first way is *cognitive*, referring to the ways in which ideas influence how policymakers understand the social world, its problems and how they can be solved. Ideas thus offer ways of constructing meaning and solutions to how to solve a certain problem or how to change the world. In other words, ideas can be understood as ‘intellectual maps’ that provide policy-makers with a rationale that helps them establishing what policies ought to be put in place to solve a particular problem (Hall, 1993). In today’s globalised world, the importance of such ideas has increased. Not only are they advocated and transferred from one country to another through organisations such as the European Union or OECD, but they also play a more important role as commonly shared solutions to common problems (Hulme, 2005; Stone, 2003).

Secondly, the influence can be *normative*, which relates to the discourses used for carrying ideas and making them influential. Discourse can be defined as the way in which a policy actor, for example a politician or a government, communicates and how they seek to give their message legitimacy. Following Schmidt (2002, p. 169) a discourse is “whatever policy actors say to one another and to the public more generally in their efforts to construct and legitimate their policy programs”. According to Schmidt (2008), there are two main forms of such discourses: communicative and coordinative discourses. While communicative discourses turn towards the public and package messages so that the public may accept them, coordinative discourses usually take place between government departments, decision-makers,

civil servants, and relate to technical aspects of how to carry out a specific reform and how to coordinate things so that it can be realised. These two discourses are present and intertwined in all policymaking, and are essential for how ideas become influential, either in policy or in discourse, or both (ibid.).

WHICH IDEAS HAVE GUIDED LEAVE POLICIES?

As mentioned earlier, the idea of gender equality has played a central role in modern (Nordic) parenting leave and childcare policies. Therefore, we will mainly focus on this idea in the next section, but first we will discuss two other influential ideas, namely the idea of social inclusion, and the good mothering idea.

The idea of *social inclusion* concerns which parents and families should be entitled to maternity (and later also) parenting leave rights (cf. Dobrotić & Blum, 2020). Originally, however, this idea was closely associated with the evolution of social rights and notably the question of whether leave rights were a concern for all mothers or only for those who were employed. In other words, in the early 1900s, the question of leave rights could be understood largely as an ideational controversy about ideas on universal vs. particular social protection (cf. Budowski & Künzler, 2020). Another related question was whether allowances should be income-related or flat-rated (Gauthier, 1996; Moss & Kamerman, 2009). During the 1900s, most countries in Europe introduced some kind of statutory maternity leave schemes with varying elements of wage-related allowances instead of flat-rate payments (Moss & Kamerman, 2009; Son & Böger, 2021). In Finland, the 1963 health insurance reform introducing a nine-week maternity leave with income-related maternity allowances was a major breakthrough in this regard. The reason is that this reform combined wage-related parental allowances with a flat-rate minimum allowance – both catering for two main categories of mothers: salaried and farmers' wives (Lammi-Taskula & Takala, 2009). A similar system was introduced in Sweden, which was the first country in the world to introduce parenting leave of

six months with income-related allowances that could be shared between parents. Together, by the end of the 1970s, these two Nordic countries were international frontrunners in terms of the most extensive leaves for parents (Gauthier, 1996).

However, today the idea of social inclusion within parenting leave has received a wider meaning through the increasing diversity of family constellations, such as same-sex parents, transgender parents or immigrant parents, although the main focus is still on the traditional family and employment as a main eligibility rule in many countries (cf. European Commission, 2019; Wong et al., 2019). During the 2000s, this interpretation of social inclusion has become influential through international treaties, such as the 2007 Yogyakarta Principles outlining central human rights for LGBT+ persons or policy recommendations from the OECD supporting parenting regardless of partnership status. This has led to an increasing acknowledgement of the rights to parenting leave across families (Wong et al., 2019). In Finland, as an example, same-sex parents received equal right to parenting leave in 2017 (Nygård & Duvander, 2021).

The other example of an influential idea in parenting leave is the *good mothering idea*, or the idea that children should be raised and cared for by the mother. Throughout history, this idea has been central for the evolution of parenting leave. Originally, the right to maternity leave concerned the safeguarding of working mothers' health, but it was also a concern for infant mortality and the welfare of children (Gauthier, 1996). Notions of the 'best interest of children' as well as 'a safe and loving upbringing' were seen as some of the ambitions that early-1900s maternity leave was supposed to achieve. Such notions became later highlighted through the post-WWII Parsonian view on the socialisation process that was best achieved through a traditional gender model that accentuated the affective and compassionate relation between mother and child (ibid). This view of 'good mothering' reinforced notions on neo-familist attitudes and were iterated in works by e.g., Donald Woods Winnicott in the 1950s,

and has later also resurfaced in the discussion about, for example, breastfeeding (e.g., Marshall et al., 2007).

In countries nurturing a strong support for a neo-familist view on motherhood, employers and governments were for a long time more reluctant to introduce compulsory and more extensive leave rights, especially when it comes to shareable rights or rights directed solely to fathers. As many countries introduced more extensive and compulsory maternity and parenting leaves in the 1960s and the 1970s, the ‘best interest of the child’ became somewhat downplayed in parenting leave policy compared to the 1950s, while the debate on ‘good mothering’ remained influential (albeit contested) in both parenting leave and childcare policy (Moss & Kamerman, 2009). However, with the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, the child perspective was once again highlighted by policy reforms and debates concerning child welfare, child poverty as well as parenting leave (e.g., Nygård, 2009). For instance, in the 2010s, the Finnish and Swedish claims for prolonged leave rights for fathers were often framed as strengthening children’s rights to both parents, not solely as a paternal right (Nygård & Duvander, 2021).

GENDER EQUALITY AND PARENTING LEAVE POLICY

Gender equality is today a widely shared policy goal in global politics, although the meaning of it varies. At a very basic international level gender equality represents “not only a fundamental right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world” (United Nations, 2021, no page), and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) lists six dimensions of gender equality (work, money, knowledge, time, power and health) with gender violence as the seventh special area. When it comes to social policy in a Western context, gender equality is “widely assumed to be a positive ideal and its pursuit is depicted as a core requirement of social justice” (Squires, 2007, p. 1). In the field of (mainly European)

family policy, and parenting leave policy in particular, gender equality largely stands for ambition to increase women's integration in the labour market while simultaneously increasing men's engagement in care work, for example through shared parenting leave or reserved leave periods for fathers (Auth & Martinek, 2017).

Historically, the idea of gender equality is closely associated with the women's movement and especially feminist writers demanding a neutralisation of gendered roles as well as the removal of obstacles to women's labour market participation. This has been particularly true in the Nordic countries (e.g., Leira, 2006). This idea of *defamilisation* and equality between the sexes emerged as an opposing view to traditional, or *familistic*, notions of motherhood as 'a profession' demanding that household work and the upbringing of children was to be recognised as productive or professional work (cf. Kurowska, in this volume; Wennemo, 1994). However, the views on motherhood and employment were not entirely undisputed among early feminists. While some feminists, such as Marianne Weber in Germany or Katti Anker Møller in Norway, openly advocated the idea of motherhood as a profession and devalued paid employment for mothers, others, such as Alva Myrdal in Sweden, endorsed a combination of women's 'twofold roles', that is, the right to motherhood while one's children are young and to be gainfully employed when one's children became older (Gauthier, 1996; Wennemo, 1994). A third view on the relation between motherhood and employment emphasised the right of women to choose between paid employment and housework. In Britain, for example, women supporting Labour advocated a feminism that valorised homework and the experience of motherhood without devaluing the importance of paid employment (Gauthier, 1996).

Due to the strong position of familist views in Europe and the Nordic countries, the idea of gender equality as defamilisation did not gain foothold until the Second World War, when the demand for female and maternal labour to replace the men fighting in the war increased

rapidly. However, when the men returned into employment there were mass redundancies of women in many countries. The strong base of familism also became evident through the books of John Bowlby, which were published by the ILO, suggesting that now when the war was over and things could return to 'normal', women could be freed from paid employment and instead devote themselves to their roles as housewives and child-carers (Gauthier, 1996). Still, the Keynesian economic doctrine, while at first accentuating mainly male mass employment, gradually led to a revalorisation of women's and mothers' employment, especially in welfare states with rapidly growing public sectors (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Gauthier, 1996). Accordingly, maternity leaves became compulsory in many countries and in countries with no prior income relation, the leave systems were transformed into extended and wage-related schemes to cater for this growing social phenomenon (Gauthier, 1996).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the claims for higher gender equality in both the labour market and in the family rose to a new level in Western Europe. Legislation on gender discrimination and abortion as well as shared parenting leave and early childhood education and care provision now became highlighted, not least in the Nordic countries that now took important steps towards a defamilising dual-earner/dual-carer model (Leira, 2006). In the realm of parenting leave, the rights to individualised leave periods for both the mother and the father now became important to the idea of gender equality, involving opportunities for working motherhood and later also caring fatherhood (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, familist ideology and the idea of parental choice continued to influence parenting leave and childcare policy through the introduction of parenting leave that could be shared between parents and through the introduction of cash-for-care benefits (*ibid.*; Mahon, 2002).

In the Nordic countries, the promotion of gender-equal parenting leave has been important for the incomes, careers, and the self-fulfilment of parents, as well as a way of neutralising and defamilising gendered roles within the family. However, it has also become

highlighted due to its importance for the overall employment rate, macro-economic growth objectives and fertility rates (Auth & Martinek, 2017; Luci-Greulich & Thévenon, 2013). In the 1990s, this employment-driven version of gender equality ideology became an integral part of the influential social investment paradigm. This paradigm did not only advocate gender equality as a matter of right, but also set this in connection with the objective to raise parental, and notably maternal, employment across Europe and to increase fathers' involvement in care work (Auth & Martinek, 2017; Morel et al., 2012).

Although parenting leave systems involving leave rights for both the mother and the father have become more common, the mother still uses the lion part of leave, even in the Nordic countries (e.g., Eydal et al., 2018; Duvander & Johansson, 2012). This has brought forward criticism regarding leave systems' capacity to defamilise gendered family roles and to enable an equal sharing of paid and unpaid work (Adema, 2013). It has also, especially in the Nordic countries, made 'state-sanctioned incentives' attempting to change parents' behaviour more common in the form of individual and reserved leave quotas that become forfeited if the parent does not use them (thus rendering the family a shorter leave period in total) (Eydal et al., 2018, 2015).

What we can see, then, and especially in the Nordic countries since the 1970s, is an increasingly dominant position of the idea of defamilising gender equality emphasising working motherhood and caring fatherhood. This idea advocates a 'sharing' of family roles rather than a 'specialisation' of such roles (cf. Leira, 2006; Liljeström, 1978). However, it is important to remember that in the Nordic countries, there is also a strong, albeit not dominant, undercurrent idea of *parental choice*, or freedom of choice, that has influenced parenting leave and childcare policy. This is not only visible through the existence of shareable parenting leave and cash-for-care benefits, it also re-echoes in cultural and political manifestations of neo-familism, such as parental opinions on equal sharing of unpaid work (Ylikännö et al., 2016;

Weckström, 2014), or the ideologies of conservative and notably confessional parties (Nygård & Duvander, 2021). Yet, this undercurrent does not necessarily preclude gender equality. Instead, it can perhaps be understood as a weaker position of defamilisation. Parental choice should not be interpreted as sheer familism, since it provides choice that can be used for achieving higher gender equality, but obviously also higher degrees of familism. Acknowledging that there are many things that may impede a genuinely free choice of parents, such as cultural expectations or gendered labour markets, institutionally-provided choice remains a choice. This is not to deny that there are today still elements of familism or neofamilism in the Nordic (and even more in some other European) countries that enhance women's roles as housewives and their roles in child rearing. Still, it is possible to detect a middle position between defamilising family role sharing and familising family role specialisation (cf. Liljeström, 1978) that values parental choice while being compatible with the idea of gender equality.

One way of understanding this puzzle and the different positions suggested here is to problematize the idea of gender equality. This operation demands that we not only define what kind of idea we are talking about when discussing gender equality within the realm of parenting leave policy, but that we also seek conceptual clarity. A problem sometimes inherent in parenting leave and childcare discourses is that we confuse gender equality as a 'world view' or as a general idea with that of gender equality as a specific policy idea (cf. Schmidt, 2008). While the first two strongly advocate equality in terms of similar rights and opportunities for women/mothers and men/fathers, the third idea is more specific as to how it wants to achieve these overall objectives. For instance, while gender equality as a general idea or 'world view' in parenting leave policy does not necessarily take a stand on defamilising or familising mechanisms, gender equality as a policy idea often does. The reason is that general ideas become politicised and permeated by certain meanings when they are used as policy ideas (e.g.,

Schmidt, 2002). Furthermore, policy ideas often become intermixed with other ideas, making them hard to separate. For instance, employment promotion for parents (and notably mothers) as a way of increasing the tax base for mature welfare states are often blurred together with employment promotion of parents as a right or as a form of defamilisation (cf. Nyby et al., 2017).

Another and partly connected problem is that gender equality in itself is conceptually ambiguous. For example, from a philosophical perspective gender equality can have slightly different meaning depending on if it is understood as *equality of opportunity* or *equality of outcome* (cf. Dworkin, 1981). The first concept can be understood as ‘treating the same’, which can pertain to providing everyone with equal opportunities or eliminating discrimination. The latter concept is not restricted to equal opportunities; instead, it seeks to actively change society and to increase equality in the meaning of ‘ending up with the same or in the same place’ (Phillips, 2004). Both these ideas can be seen as different figurations of the deeper idea of *gender equity*, that is, what is to be considered just, fair or equitable in the relation between women and men, both within the family realm and in a wider sense (ibid.).

Implemented on parenting leave, the idea of *gender equality in terms of opportunity* would prevail if parents have the same opportunities to choose between paid and unpaid work. Accordingly, the idea of *gender equality in terms of outcome (equity)* would be if the choices or the behaviours of parents make them more equal in the end regarding a certain criterion, such as their labour market participation rate. Since there are several limits to equal choice, for instance gender-segregated labour markets, wage inequalities, gender discrimination and gendered parental roles, advocates of the latter idea have seen ‘state-sanctioned’ parenting leave regulations as necessary for achieving higher gender equity in the form of a more equal division of unpaid and paid work among women and men. To the advocates of the former idea, by contrast, such regulations represent infringements upon parents’ freedom of choice in

matters of parenting leave or childcare, even if they agree on needing to remove barriers for the sake of equal opportunities, e.g., by removing gender discrimination or obstacles to female employment (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; cf. Nyby et al., 2017).

In the politicisation of parenting leave and childcare policy, these two ideational positions have often been used for legitimating policy choices and reforms. In the following we will use policies and discourses from Finland to exemplify this.

THE POLITICISATION OF THE IDEA OF GENDER EQUALITY – THE FINNISH CASE

How, then, can we interpret recent parenting leave and childcare policies in Finland against the backdrop of the abovementioned interpretations of gender equality? Like most other Nordic countries, recent parenting leave policies and the discourses underpinning them in Finland have been largely about increasing gender equality in terms of outcome (equity) rather than opportunity, that is, to achieve more equal distribution of paid and unpaid (caring) work between spouses (Eydal et al., 2018; Nygård & Duvander, 2021). The background has been the uneven use of parenting leave periods (including the home care allowance) between spouses, with mothers as the foremost carers of small children in Finland (Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2020). Allegedly, longer reserved leave quotas for parents, and notably the father, would increase their leave uptake rate and thus bring about higher gender *equity* (Eydal et al., 2018; 2015). This position is, for example, clearly visible in the government program of the current left-centre government.

Together with social partners, we will achieve an ambitious parental leave reform that supports the wellbeing of families. The objective is for leave and care duties to become more evenly distributed between parents (...) The reform will give mothers and fathers an equal quota of leave months (...) The home care allowance continues in its current form (Finnish Government, 2019, p. 135)

Shortly after its inauguration, the government launched a commission to prepare a fundamental reform of the Finnish parenting leave system. Since 2013, the parenting leave system includes a three-week daddy quota as a part of the 9-week paternity leave. The leave earmarked for the mother is 17.5 weeks and the shareable parenting leave period is 26.3 weeks (Kela, 2021). However, in February 2021, the government presented its proposal for a reformed leave system, which would include a one-month pre-labour leave, followed by a 6.4-month reserved quota for each parent with a transferable period of 0–63 days. This reform is scheduled to take effect in August 2022 (STM, 2021).

Nevertheless, one interesting and conspicuous feature of the Finnish parenting leave and childcare system is that the idea of gender equality in opportunity and its sibling idea of parental choice is relatively strong (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). For instance, parents can choose between different childcare arrangements, such as public childcare, subventions for using private childcare or home care of children (Kela, 2021). Whether these alternatives could be said to represent a true freedom of choice for parents, and notably mothers, is a different question that remains contested. Still, Finnish mothers seem more traditional in their attitudes towards family roles than in other Nordic countries (Ylikännö et al., 2016; Weckström, 2014). Also, among conservative and confessional parties, there has been a strong and long-lasting support of these ideas (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Nygård & Duvander, 2021; Nyby et al., 2017). For instance, in the 2018 family policy programme by the Christian Democrats, parenting leave quotas were seen as an infringement upon the freedom of choice of families:

The Christian Democrats do not support leave quotas between parents, since this would infringe upon the freedom of choice and lead to unnecessary regulation (Christian Democrats, 2018, p. 20)

Still, Finnish parties have become more positively disposed over time to the idea of gender equality in opportunity within parenting leave, as well as the idea of ‘state-sanctioned’ parental

quotas (equity) (Nygård & Duvander, 2021). The only party that has remained openly negative to this idea is the Christian Democrats. Also, among the Centre Party and the nationalist-populist Finns Party there is a strong support for the idea of parental choice even if they both have also endorsed the idea of gender equality in outcome represented by parenting leave quotas during the 2010s. For example, in the 2015 election manifesto by the Centre Party, the resistance against a more intensive use of parenting leave quotas was still visible, but one year later the party had warmed to this idea while simultaneously defending the idea of parental choice.

Give home services and freedom of choice back to families (...) Families need genuine freedom of choice in matters relating to the care of their children. Compulsory quotas in the home care of children are not a functioning solution (Centre Party, 2015, p. 4)

Our aim is to improve the opportunities for home care of children under two for both parents. This is possible by extending the insurance-based parental leave period and to change the structure of the home care leave. The insurance-based parental leave period will be extended by prolonging both the shareable parental leave period as well as the quote meant for fathers. Only the existing quota meant for mothers would remain the same (Centre Party, 2016, p. 4)

The fact that conservative parties have started to (partly) endorse the idea of gender equality in terms of outcome within parenting leave does not mean that it has abandoned the idea of freedom of choice. Rather it suggests a combination of the two policy ideas in a time when party competition and a stronger international influence of ideas have forced conservative parties to change positions. In other words, although the Finnish parenting leave and childcare policy has not changed much during the 2010s, the growing acceptance of the idea of gender equality in terms of outcome among conservatives may be of importance for the current leave reform proposal to stand a chance of success.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the role of ideas in parenting leave policy, to problematize the idea of gender equality, and to exemplify how different interpretations have been used in Finnish parenting leave policy and discourses. On the basis of this discussion, we conclude that ideas are important for policy in the field of parenting leave. Their influence on policy stems not only from their role as cognitive maps helping policymakers to understand the social world and problems inherent in this world and how to solve these problems, but also from different actors using discourses to legitimize such ideas. One factor that has increased the influence of ideas is globalisation, associated with a rise in idea transfer and policy learning (e.g., Hulme, 2005). In the case of Finnish parenting leave, the growing acceptance of gender equality in terms of outcome within parenting leave policy can at least partly be explained by the roles that organisations such as the European Union or ‘best practices’ such as Swedish parenting leave have played in this sense (cf. Nygård & Duvander, 2021).

A second conclusion concerns the idea of gender equality. As we have displayed, this idea is multifaceted, and can address both equality in opportunity as well as equality in outcome. This means that even a party that vehemently opposes the idea of gender equality in outcome, for instance in the form of reserved parenting leave quotas, such as the Christian Democrats in Finland, may still argue that they support gender equality. What this means is that they oppose ‘state-sanctioned’ regulations of parenting leave, such as daddy quotas that are meant to influence parental behaviour and that become forfeited if parents do not act in the way they are supposed to. However, they still look favourably upon gender equality as an equality in opportunity by supporting the principle that there should be leave opportunities for the parents to choose from. This also means that positions in parenting leave and childcare policy are often complicated as far as the idea of gender equality (and others) is concerned. The reason for this is that it can be used both as a more abstract idea or as a specific policy idea,

and that gender equality can mean different things. It is not a simple matter of being against or for gender equality, rather it is a question of which idea of gender equality we refer to. This adds another layer to be taken into consideration when studying ideas: the same idea can be interpreted in different ways.

The third conclusion is that while the idea of gender equality has become increasingly important in Finland during the post-war period, it is first and foremost the principle of gender equality in terms of opportunity that has been important in parenting leave and childcare policy. This can be seen from the fact that both parenting leave and the childcare system has promoted freedom of choice, while being rather limited when it comes to ‘state-sanctioned’ regulations meant to change parental behaviour. That parents can freely decide how to share the parenting leave period between themselves, which also goes for the home care leave and other cash-for-care systems such as the private care allowance, suggests that it is the principle of gender equality in terms of opportunity that has been important. With the new proposed family leave reform (STM, 2021), this will of course change.

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