

# INTERNATIONAL

## WORK/LIFE COUNTRY BRIEFING SERIES

### NORWAY

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The Center for  
**Work & Family**  
BOSTON COLLEGE

Carroll School of Management  
140 Commonwealth Avenue  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167  
ph: (617) 552-2844  
FAX: (617) 552-2859  
http: //www.bc.edu/cwf

**Editor:** Ellen Bankert  
The Center for Work and Family

**Country Expert:** Terje Lie  
RF - Rogaland Research

**Graphic Design:** Naomi Sheehab  
Designkartel

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#### OVERVIEW

In recent years, the relationship between work and family life has become one of the most important themes in Norway's social debate. Norwegian public policies demonstrate the prominence of this topic on the political agenda by identifying and working toward four broad goals:

- 1) to enable parents to combine work and child care;
- 2) to increase equity of men and women in everyday life;
- 3) to support children's development; and
- 4) to strengthen the quality of life for families with children.

Reconciling work and family has not been, however, a major priority within the private sector.

Just recently, employers are starting to consider policies related to parental leave, flexible and/or reduced work hours, homework

services, and assistance with child care. Much of the policy related to work and family has been driven by trade unions, which play a significant role in regulating rights around wages, working hours, working arrangements related to job flexibility, and private care demands.

In some companies there are also specific agreements between employers and employees (e.g. flexi-time or other tailor made arrangements). Workplaces that are considered "leaders" have developed initiatives including on-site kindergartens, flexible working hours and other services such as support of leisure time activities including rent of holiday housing.

Norway has been moving from a traditional social pattern of one breadwinner to a society in which both adult members of the household work outside of the home. The most common household structure is a father who works full-time and a mother who works part-time. Next in frequency is a household where both parents work full-time. For

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women living in couple relationships, financial support duties continue to be less important than responsibilities relating to home and children. Even

though the two-income family is well established in Norway, the traditional family model with a male breadwinner and a housewife continues to be the framework used for some policy initiatives such as school schedules, holidays and leisure time.



## SOCIAL / DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

- Single parent families comprise 6% of families in Norway.
- 64% of women in Norway are in the workforce; 46% of the workforce is women.
- 70% of married women and 79% of married women with children under 16 years are in the workforce.
- In families with children under 18, 65% are married couples; 13% are living together but unmarried; 19% are headed by single mothers; and 2% are headed by single fathers.
- 47% of women in the work force are employed part-time; 9% of men work part-time.
- In recent years, the birth rate in Norway has been increasing and is now among the highest in the EC countries. (In 1996, the rate was 1.89 births per woman compared to 1.5 in European countries, in general). Part of this increase is attributable to a greater number of families having a third child. These new trends are viewed as evidence of the effectiveness of the recent maternal and paternal leave reforms in Norway.
- The unemployment rate in 1995 was 4.7%, which has declined in recent years. Inflation is low, averaging between 1 and 2%.

## PUBLIC POLICY SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Central to the understanding of work and family in Norway is the Scandinavian welfare model which dictates that a range of benefits are

provided by the government and considered universal citizen rights. Specific public benefits supporting this basic concept include: maternal and paternal leave, protection/support for part-time workers, child care subsidies, and elder care. In addition, unmarried, divorced and separated families with children are provided public benefits. Decisions about these rights are made on a national or municipality level. While many family-oriented benefits are provided as part of the welfare model, many of the benefits related to the reconciliation of work and family are attached to paid employment and membership in the labour force.

The government department with responsibility for families is called the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs. There are essentially three levels of decisions concerning relations between work and family:

1. **National:** Encompassing welfare benefits and social policy, including, for example, statutory leaves and education reform for children to start school at younger age.
2. **Trade Union:** Concerning work-related policy such as wages and working hours and flexibility.

### 3. Individual and Collective

**Agreements between Employers and Employees:** Addressing issues such as flexible working hours and tailor made arrangements to manage job and family demands.

However, the family policy is incomplete, resulting in several social challenges, including:

- A "care vacuum" in the home as a result of the increased women in the workforce. Men have not entered the work of maintaining the family to a corresponding degree and the care vacuum within the homes has not been dealt with politically.
- An increasing amount of dysfunctional children dealing with a range of problems. In the past, there has been an unstated social contract between society and families that families would "step in" if a child showed signs of destructive or anti-social behavior. Today, however, families are not always able to effectively buffer family members from social problems.

### Maternal and Paternal Leaves

The parental leave policy is a support system highly related to employment in

#### PUBLIC POLICY FOR FAMILY LEAVES

	Time Allowed	Pay Rate
Maternal Leave	42 weeks	100%
Paternal Leave	52 weeks	80%
Extended Maternal/Paternal Leave	52 weeks	not paid
Father's Quota	4 weeks	100%
Leave for Child's illness	10 days/year 15 days/year if >2 children	100%



terms of benefit levels. Maternal leaves are available for 42 weeks at 100% pay or 52 weeks at 80% pay. In addition, parents may take a leave from their job with full payment during a child's illness (10 days per year, 15 days if more than two children), and when children begin grammar school. (see chart)

The latest modification to the leave policies is the "time account scheme."

Instead of using the entire leave benefit when a child is born, parents can now take leave for six months and then combine 50% work with 50% leave, stretching their

leave over a longer period of time. Either parent is entitled to use the time account scheme either in turn or at the same time. In addition, the right to paid leave was extended again in February, 1995 to include a right to leave without pay. Now, after one's paid leave has been exhausted, each parent has the right to take an additional year leave without pay. Pension rights of parents taking parental leave are equivalent to three years in the workforce.

### Child Care

While there is a commitment to providing public child care, issues of cost and availability have emerged in recent years. Families use a variety of child care options, including center-based care, in-home care, and family daycare. 60% of the center-based care is provided by public organizations, with significant variations in the cost and

structure between municipalities. In Oslo, for example, the cost of care is based on income. Families earning about \$14,000-\$15,000 in household income pay approximately \$1,000 year for child care, while families earning \$50,000 and higher pay approximately \$5,000.

All child care, whether a public or private facility, is monitored by the

municipality and central government. For families with low income or special needs children, local governments may subsidize some of the cost of child care.

Preschool teachers have at least three years university training, which is the equivalent of training for teachers of school-age children.

The newest trend in the child care arena is school reform that begins schooling one year earlier for young children. Starting in the fall of 1997, children will begin school at age six rather than age seven. This policy change has been in development for some time and has been driven by many factors, including a desire to "modernize" the educational system and to respond to the needs of dual income families with both parents working during the school day.

### Elder Care

Given the aging of the population, the issue of elder care is prominent in Norway. As part of the country's approach to caring for its citizens at the community level, local municipalities are expected to provide care for the elderly.

While municipalities provide nursing homes, home care, transportation services, and housing, there is considerable discussion at the Parliament level of the need for greater funding for these local services. Other public policy issues related to elder care include the need for expanded home health care and elderly pensions. There is agreement at the Parliament level for the need for greater funding for the elderly; the issue at stake is how much to pay.

### Support for Part-Time Workers

47% of women and 8% of men in the workforce are employed on a part-time basis. These part-time as well as temporary workers are provided with at least minimal government-supported benefits. For example, while the legislation restricts temporary contracts, they too, have equal rights and benefits in relation to public services, such as sickness pay and redundancy payments. However, they do not have equal rights compared to full time workers in relation to protection in the company. In addition, four weeks paid holidays are reserved for full time workers.

## HOT TOPICS IN WORK AND FAMILY

### Gender issues

A family's financial support needs are met by a gender-determined division of labor between father and mother, with the father as the primary breadwinner. On average, he works more hours per week, is more likely to have second jobs, and works more overtime than either female colleagues with children or his female partner. In addition to doing more housework and care for children,

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women are more likely to adapt their professional activities to the needs of families by reducing their working hours. On average, approximately 70-80% of all homework is done by women.

The issue of equal opportunity for women is prominent in Norway today.

40% of the ministers in government are women, with business lagging behind with a low percentage of

female leaders. A related hot issue is equal wages within professions. Men are paid better than women, although the gap has decreased in recent years. In the retail industry, for example, the average monthly salary for women was 82% of men's salary in 1994, up from 79% in 1990. Another study of eight occupations (physicians, nurses, police, journalists, secretaries, skilled and unskilled metal workers, and unskilled health workers) showed the difference in annual income varies approximately \$5,000 to \$9000 in favor of men.

### **Encouragement of men to take advantage of paternity leaves**

While women continue to take more and longer career breaks to raise children, there is also increased efforts to stimulate the use of paternal leaves. In 1993, the government introduced a four-week paternity leave. If this portion of leave is not utilized, the benefit is not transferable to a spouse and is lost to the family. This novel approach is referred to as "careful compulsion" and is having the desired effect: there has been a substantial increase in the num-

ber of fathers taking this part of parental leave. Today, 70% of all fathers take advantage of this option.

### **Expanded role of employers in supporting working families**

There is a growing recognition that more support from employers is needed to enable men and women to meet their work and home responsibilities.

Some workplaces are rather progressive, believing that job and family roles must be viewed together and that professional and

caregiving roles must be integrated.

More common, however, are workplaces based on the traditional philosophy that family issues are a private matter and of no concern to the workplace. In recent years, the government in Norway has been critical of the passivity among employers in addressing family issues.

Within the workplace, there is considerable attention paid today to the issue of flexibility in working hours. In a study of eight occupations, several indicators of flexibility were examined. Questions were asked such as acceptance of leaving early or arriving to work late due to child care reasons, acceptance of bringing children to work, opportunities for children to reach their parents by phone during work hours, etc. Journalists, secretaries and the police reported the highest degrees of flexibility; skilled and unskilled laborers reported the least flexibility. Another study also showed that the newspaper industry is among the leaders in providing a family friendly workplace.

There is much room for progress in terms of family friendly practices at the workplace. At many good employers, it's quite common to find flexible work options and part-time work. At leading employers, assistance with child care may be available, as is the option to work from home. The issue of a family-friendly "culture" varies considerably from company to company, with no distinct difference between public and private employers.

## **LOCAL RESOURCES**

Terje Lie  
**RF - Rogaland Research**  
P.O. Box 2503, Ullandhaug  
4004 Stavanger, Norway  
Phone: (47) 51 87 51 26  
Email: Terje.Lie@rf.no

Berit Brandth  
**NTNU (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)**  
7034 Trondheim, Norway  
Phone: (47) 73 59 22 85  
Email: berit.brandth@sv.ntnu.no

**Statistics Norway**  
PO Box 8131DEP  
NOO33 Oslo, Norway  
Phone: (47) 22 86 46 42 43  
Email: <http://www.ssb.no>

Anne Lise Ellingsaether  
**Institute for Social Research (ISF)**  
Munthes 31  
0260 Oslo, Norway  
Phone: (47) 22 55 45 10

### **About the Center . . .**

*The Center for Work and Family at Boston College is a research organization devoted to the study of work and home-life issues. Through research, demonstration projects, corporate partnerships, and policy analysis, the Center works to promote corporate and community responsiveness to families.*