

Conference “Work-life balance as a leverage for women’s empowerment and promoting gender equality” Rome 12th April 2022**SESSION 1: POLICIES AND REFORMS IN FAVOUR OF WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT TO ENCOURAGE GENDER EQUALITY – EXAMPLES FROM MEMBER STATES****Minister for Nordic Cooperation and Equality of Finland, Thomas Blomqvist**

Dear Chair, dear colleagues and participants,

Women’s economic independence plays a key role in achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment in all areas of life. In our view, we need to strengthen our efforts to ensure full and equal participation of women in working life.

In my remarks, I will focus on the question of sharing care and parental leaves equally between parents and use Finland as an example.

Free and high-quality education from basic to higher education has contributed to promoting gender equality and women’s equal participation in the labour market. As a result, the employment rate of mothers is around 80 percent in Finland.

All children under school age have a subjective right to early childhood education and care. Both parents have the right to use parental leave, and a father’s quota was introduced already a few decades ago. All these are important elements that support women’s labor market participation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The equal sharing of parental leaves has been one of the longest lasting topics in the Finnish gender equality debate. Men’s stronger involvement in family responsibilities is indeed an important factor for women’s work and private life reconciliation.

I must admit that despite our parental leave system, and subjective right to early childhood education and care, the parental leaves in Finland are still often unequally divided. Men only use 11 percent of all parental allowance days. The father’s share is growing - but change is so slow, that it would take decades until it would be equally shared. It is clear that new measures are needed to speed up this desired change.

In order to tackle this question our government has introduced a family leave reform, that will give both parents an equal quota of parental leave. The aim is to create a model that meets the needs of modern society and increases gender equality in both the daily lives of families and in working life. The position of women in the labour market will improve when parental leave is divided more equally between the parents.

The reform enters into force this summer, August 2022. Compared to our present parental leave system, the reform is a radical shift in many ways. The parental leaves will be divided equally between the parents so that both parents will have a quota of 160 days.

The father’s quota will increase from the present 9 weeks to 16 weeks. According to various studies, quotas have proved to encourage men to use more parental leave. The other side of the coin is that if the father does not use his quota, those allowance days will be lost.

This reform still allows parents to transfer about 40% (63 days) of their own quota to the other parent. Same-sex couples have the same amount of parental leave days. Single parents will have the same total amount of days as in two-parent-households.

Dear participants,

With this reform, we want to strengthen nondiscrimination and equality in working life and to reduce pay differences between the sexes. The coming years will show how well the objectives are achieved.

The impact of this reform depends on the decisions of the parents, especially on the choices fathers will make. In addition to the legal framework, we also need an attitude change. This is why we are also investing in training, communications and campaigning to increase awareness of the reform and its possibilities.

Information and support for the fathers to encourage them to use their leaves is important. The workplaces also play a key role in supporting parents, and particularly men, to take parental leave.

In essence, equal parental leave is really one of the few political goals that is a win-win for all: It strengthens the fathers' right to family life, the mothers' position on the labour market and it supports the child's connection to both of its parents. We decisionmakers must support this with solutions that encourage this kind of development.

As minister for equality – and as a man and a father – I hope that many more fathers will make use of, and value, time spent with their children, especially in the early stages of life. Time spent with your own children is time well spent. It's one of the best investments in the future one can make.

I wish you a very rewarding conference. Thank you!