

Since the introduction of parental leave in Sweden in 1974, more and more European, and non-European countries have been introducing this type of leave to enable not only working mothers, but also working fathers to take care of their children. Parental leave is gradually becoming more generous (in terms of length and payment) and some countries have decided to secure some part of this leave exclusively for fathers. Several studies have shown that fathers' take-up of parental leave is important for their relationship with their child, union/marital stability and gender equality at the labour market and at home. Yet many men do not take advantage of the opportunity to take up parental leave. For example, in Germany, where parents get two additional, well-paid months of leave provided that each parent takes up at least two months of leave, fathers' non-take-up exceeds 60 percent. But in many more countries the non-take up of parental leave by fathers is very high, often exceeding over 90 percent of the entitled men. To what extent does this result from their free choices? And do those who use parental leave choose it freely? These questions have not been answered so far.

Nobel laureate in economics (1998) Amartya Sen recognised freedom of choice as a crucial component of people's well-being. Increasing peoples' well-being is the ultimate aim of the provision of social benefits, social services and other types of entitlements. If we apply Sen's concept of well-being to social policy, a primary aim should be to ensure that people make free choices about whether to take advantage of the social entitlements available to them. It is then crucial for social policy research to assess the degree to which the non-/partial take-up of social entitlements, including parental leaves, results from people's exerting freedom of choice, as well as to identify what restricts this freedom. This project makes the first attempt to undertake this vital endeavour.

As the starting point for her project, dr hab. Anna Kurowska proposes an innovative, comprehensive, interdisciplinary theoretical framework and develops new methods to assess the extent to which people make free choices to use or not use social entitlements. She will apply this framework and methods to examine the extent of freedom in fathers' choices about the (non/partial) take-up of parental leave and the role of different factors that restrain it, in a group of four diverse countries: Germany, Japan, Poland and Sweden.

Dr hab. Anna Kurowska also aims at formulating guidelines for policy design to ensure that the (non/partial) take-up of parental leave by fathers is the result of them exerting freedom of choice, but also to inform policy on the extent to which free choices contribute to (non/partial) take-up of parental leave entitlements.