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Marie Flinkfeldt & Frida Höglund

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# 'The family administrator': women take most responsibility for information-seeking, planning and administration of parental benefit in Sweden

Marie Flinkfeldt  and Frida Höglund 

Department of Social Work, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates parents' information-seeking about parental leave. It examines gendered patterns in parents' contacts with the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) over telephone, email, and on Facebook with a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. We show that women not only contact the SSIA more than men do, they also to a larger extent approach the SSIA early on – a practice that may facilitate strategic planning – as well as administer their partner's leave. By such means, the paper sheds light on women's role as 'administrator' in taking more responsibility for both their own and their partner's parental leave. These findings are in line with previous research showing that women often act as the 'project leader' of the family, taking responsibility for unpaid (and often unrecognized) tasks that make everyday life run smoothly. In shedding light on women's considerable administrative responsibility for parental leave, the study thus brings new knowledge on what might be one piece of the puzzle of the slow progression of gender equality in this area, pointing to informational and administrative services as a potential arena for gender equality-promoting work.

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Parental leave; parental benefit; gender equality; doing gender

## Introduction

Despite the progress in eliminating gender discrimination and inequality in families, gendered inequalities globally range from exposure to violence and lack of rights to decide over one's life to gender differences in wages, leisure time, and unpaid work such as housework and childcare (United Nations Women, 2019). In global comparison – and even in a European perspective – the Nordic countries stand out: not only are men and women equal on a legislative level, but social policy is specifically designed to encourage gender equality and the Nordic countries recurrently rank among the most gender equal in the world (Björnberg, 2016, cf. Bjørnholt, 2012; World Economic Forum, 2023). Persistent gendered inequalities in Nordic families are therefore of particular interest for family scholars, as they may be seen as a 'best scenario', and remaining issues here are likely salient in other countries as well (Borchorst & Siim, 2008).

**CONTACT** Marie Flinkfeldt  [marie.flinkfeldt@uu.se](mailto:marie.flinkfeldt@uu.se)

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For these reasons, the current paper focuses on family policy in Sweden, which has successfully implemented a dual earner/dual carer family model (i.e. that both parents should contribute by earning an income as well as caring for children) which has widespread support both in politics and among Swedish parents (Nygård & Duvander, 2021). Here, stay-at-home mothers are uncommon and fatherhood norms have developed to include active care and emotional involvement (Björk, 2013; Klinth, 2008). Despite this, there are inequalities in how families make use of the generous, gender-equally designed parental benefits offered by the welfare state, for instance in women's longer parental leaves and more extensive care for children when they are sick (e.g. Duvander & Viklund, 2020; Harryson et al., 2012; Holth et al., 2012; Magnusson, 2005). As patterns established when the children are small tend to linger and a traditionally gendered division of parental leave is associated with less gender equality in how other tasks are divided later on (Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Evertsson et al., 2018; Haas & Hwang, 2008), understanding how unequal use of parental leave comes about is important.

While research has focused on how Swedish families' decisions are financially motivated (e.g. Duvander et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2020) or impacted by social norms related to motherhood and fatherhood (e.g. Almqvist et al., 2011; Boye & Evertsson, 2018), less is known about the *practical* processes through which these patterns materialize. Some studies have brought attention to how Swedish parents negotiate their parental leave, how women tend to assume responsibility for planning at an early stage, and how this may impact the division of leave between the parents (Alsarve, 2021). Since parental benefit regulations in Sweden are complex, considerable knowledge is required to navigate the system, and this is in itself a source of inequality (Flinkfeldt & Höglund, *in press*). It has been shown that mothers tend to know these regulations better than fathers, which likely impacts on the possibility to claim rights (ISF, 2020). An important question is therefore who it is that seeks information to plan and administer the parental leave for a child, something that has to date received marginal attention from researchers (but see Försäkringskassan, 2017, for an overview). This brings into view a largely hidden, unpaid, administrative work task connected to childcare, which relates to what family researchers both in the Nordic countries and elsewhere have described as women being the 'project leader' in the family. This implies having the overall responsibility for organizing the family's day-to-day business – what Hochschild (1989, p. 276) calls the 'management of domestic life' – i.e. keeping track of scheduling and what needs to be done and when (Daly, 2002), for instance planning meals or purchases, but also taking the overall responsibility for planning childcare arrangements (Alsarve, 2021). In addition to *doing* more unpaid housework, research thus indicates that women both in Sweden and elsewhere are to an even larger extent responsible for *planning* it (Alsarve, 2019). This relates to what has been termed 'cognitive labor' in the household, which entails anticipating needs, identifying alternatives for filling those needs, making decisions, and monitoring progress (Daminger, 2019).

The current study adds new knowledge in this respect, by investigating gendered patterns in the responsibility parents (or prospective parents) take for seeking information about, planning, and administering parental leave. Of particular interest are contacts taken before the parental leave starts, as knowledge gained at this point may be of particular importance for forming a foundation for making decisions about who should be on leave, when, and for how long (cf. Försäkringskassan, 2017). We examine authentic

interactions between parents and social insurance officers across multiple social insurance customer service channels (telephone, email, Facebook) in Sweden, employing a mixed methods approach to investigate the following questions:

- (1) To what extent, and when (in relation to childbirth/adoption), do men and women contact the Swedish Social Insurance Agency about parental benefit?
- (2) To what extent do men and women facilitate or administer their partner's leave?
- (3) How do parents orient to responsibility for information-seeking and planning of parental leave?

### **Gendered patterns related to parental leave in Sweden**

Like the other Nordic countries, Sweden is well-known for its 'family-friendly' policies that work in favour of a dual-earner, dual-carer model. These include, for example, individual taxation, highly subsidized public childcare, and tax deductions for domestic services (Lane & Jordansson, 2020). While access to childcare has been important for the 'dual-earner' part of the family model, gender equal rights to parental leave have been a central component of the 'dual-carer' part (Nyberg, 2012). Parental leave is thus a policy area that has been central for promoting gender equality, and regulations have been recurrently adjusted in order to facilitate a more gender-equal use. In addition, the Swedish state has repeatedly funded campaigns to encourage mothers and fathers to share time at home more equally when the children are small (Klinth, 2008).

The Swedish parental benefit system is tax-funded and designed to compensate for income loss when parents stay home with small children instead of working or studying. The benefit is work-based, meaning that parents do not have to be Swedish citizens to qualify. The benefit has had a gender neutral design since 1974 and can be used flexibly during 480 paid days per child, split equally between the parents. 150 of the 240 benefit days allocated to each parent can be transferred to the other parent, allowing for flexible use within the family. The remaining 90 benefit days are reserved for each parent on a 'use it or lose it' basis. These are colloquially referred to as a 'father's quota' or 'daddy months', but in fact apply to mothers and fathers alike.

One 'benefit day' covers 77.6% of the parent's regular earnings per day, up to a ceiling level, whereas a smaller portion of the days instead employs a flat rate compensation. Many employers also apply top-up schemes that increase compensation, but conditions vary (Duvander et al., 2022). Meanwhile, parents have the right to stay at home without compensation (or choose to only use the benefit for a portion of the time at home) during the first 18 months to make their parental leave last longer. This way, parents may weigh monetary compensation against time at home with the child. Saved benefit days can be used until the child turns twelve, for example to be able to stay at home with the child during school holidays. The leave can be continuously adjusted as long as there are remaining 'days' to use. In practice, the possibility to use this flexibility depends on the parent's financial position, job situation, and salary level – all of which are unequally distributed in society with regards to, e.g. gender, social class, age, and ethnicity. This means that parents with less financial resources, lower education, and a background outside of Sweden can use the benefit's flexibility to a lesser degree and, in effect, take shorter parental leaves (ISF, 2023).

A similar, parallel system is the ‘temporary parental benefit’, which compensates parents financially when they stay home with children (twelve and younger) who are sick and cannot attend pre-school or school. The temporary parental benefit is also used to compensate the parent who is not giving birth for ten days at the time of delivery and the first time at home with the newborn. Despite the gender neutral construction of this benefit, these days are colloquially sometimes referred to as ‘paternity days’.

Gender equality in this area is typically measured in the proportion of paid parental benefit days that men and women use, or in some cases the proportion of time (paid or unpaid) spent on leave. Research has shown a steady move towards equal sharing, but mothers in Sweden nevertheless take about 13 months with parental benefit in the first two years (of which 9.5 months are paid), and fathers about 3.5 months (of which two months are paid) (Duvander & Viklund, 2014). Almost all mothers use some parental benefit during the first two years, whereas the corresponding figure for fathers is about 82% (ISF, 2023). While fathers’ use may seem high in international comparison, it thus differs considerably from mothers’ use. In addition, only 17% of heterosexual couples share their parental leave equally, as measured within a 60/40 range (Duvander & Viklund, 2020). Gender also intersects with other categories in this respect – for instance, high-income mothers use less paid days of parental leave than low-income mothers, whereas high-income fathers use more paid days than low-income fathers (ISF, 2023).

Several reforms have contributed to increasing men’s parental leave over the last 50 years. Of particular importance was the introduction of the first reserved quota in 1995. This implied that 30 benefit days were reserved for each parent, and led to increased use among fathers and decreased use among mothers (ISF, 2012). In 2002, this quota was raised to 60 days, and in 2016 to 90 days. This led to further increases in fathers’ use of the benefit, but the effect was not as strong and affected higher-income fathers more, as compared to the first reform (Duvander & Johansson, 2014). In 2008, an ‘equality bonus’ was also introduced for families that shared the benefit equally, who received a cash payment. However, this had limited effects, in part due to its complicated construction, and has since been withdrawn (Rosenqvist, 2022).

While both researchers and policy-makers have focused on measuring the use of parental benefit days, less is known about how these patterns emerge, i.e. how families in practice go about navigating the complex regulations and their financial implications, in planning their parental leave. Previous research has highlighted the impact of a range of factors on how parents divide their leave, including both financial and normative aspects. For instance, there are differing ideals of fatherhood and motherhood that may affect parents’ choices, as mothers and fathers are seen as equally important but not always as equivalent – for example, motherhood is still associated with prioritizing children over other areas of life, including paid work, and mothers are sometimes still thought of as more ‘natural’ caregivers (Björk, 2013; Evertsson et al., 2018). There is also a strong ‘one year norm’, by which mothers are expected to be on parental leave for the first year, whereas fathers in heterosexual couples are assumed to take parental leave after that, adapting the length of the leave to their work (Boye & Evertsson, 2018). Meanwhile, parents in Sweden tend to say that sharing parenting responsibilities is important (Duvander, 2014) and these views are likely reflected in the reasons parents give for unequal sharing, e.g. in highlighting external factors as discouraging equal

sharing and emphasizing a desire to take equal responsibility (Augustsson & Harryson, 2015; Kaufman & Grönlund, 2021; Nyman et al., 2018). Given the persistence of gendered patterns in other areas of family life – despite Swedish parents’ strive towards equality – it is thus important to understand the practices by which such patterns materialize in the first place.

### Theory: a ‘doing gender’ approach

The study takes a broadly ethnomethodological approach by setting out to investigate situated meaning-making in interaction (Garfinkel, 1996). In focus is the notion of ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987), which has grown to be ‘one of the most influential and widely appropriated ideas in many fields of social research’ (Wickes & Emmison, 2007, p. 311). This approach highlights the importance of recognizing gender as a social construct that is created and reinforced through our everyday behaviours and interactions with others. Moving from a focus on ‘gender differences’ towards an interest in social practices means shifting analysis from seeing gender and other categories as something one ‘has’ to something one ‘does’ and is held accountable for (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). A multitude of studies has shown how such ‘passing’ goes beyond physical attributes, identifying everyday conduct as part of how someone comes to be seen as, for example, a ‘proper woman’ (Garfinkel, 1967). Such ‘doings’ are thus an ever ongoing process in our social lives, and close observation of the interactional situations themselves can reveal the taken-for-granted aspects of inequality in everyday life (West & Zimmerman, 2009).

The doing of gender has to do with normative and moral aspects of particular activities, and for issues regarding ‘who is to do what, get what, plan or execute action, direct or be directed, incumbency in significant social categories such as “female” and “male” seems to become pointedly relevant’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 143). The division of parental responsibilities can thus be a way to ‘do gender’. For instance, research has shown how notions of femininity are bound up with care for children (e.g. Magnusson, 2005) and women’s larger share of certain responsibilities is therefore part of how gender is done, for example when mothers manage a larger portion of child-related contacts with public authorities (Hakimnia et al., 2015) or take a leading role in decision-making about how to divide the care for children (Cannito, 2020). While patterns are subject to change, motherhood, in this respect, still tends to be done in slightly different ways than fatherhood, typically in line with an emphasis on care rather than financial contributions (e.g. Björk, 2013; Kaufman & Grönlund, 2021). Parenting should therefore be understood as a morally regulated practice that is bound to ‘doings’ of gender.

The specifics, of course, vary across contexts. In Sweden, where the welfare state actively promotes gender equality, research has pointed to a tension between ‘doing gender’, on the one hand, and ‘doing gender equality’, on the other, which characterizes everyday interaction in modern couples (Flinkfeldt, 2014; Nyman et al., 2018). As Nyman et al. (2018, p. 44) argue, ‘contradictions between traditional and modern constructions and discourses of gender contribute to an understanding of the complexity and ambivalence present in how couples understand and relate to a gender equal division of housework’ and men and women may see themselves as gender equal, in accordance with gender egalitarian norms in Sweden, ‘regardless of how they *actually* organize their

everyday lives'. In this sense, parents may 'do gender' at the same time as they 'do gender equality' or work to 'undo' gender, and the practical division of tasks may also disalign with how the accountability of a certain division is interactionally managed (Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2023). Swedish men's parental leave may in this sense be a way to 'display modern fatherhood', part of which relates to the 'doing' of gender equality and an 'undoing' of gender, whereas less egalitarian arrangements in other countries, such as the UK, may reproduce gendered expectations on parents to a larger degree (Kaufman & Grönlund, 2021).

Interaction scholars have, however, cautioned against presupposing that there are gendered relevancies in what a person does, arguing that there is a risk of bringing in essentialism through the 'back door' in the sense that a woman's actions are seen as 'doing femininity' and a man's actions are seen as 'doing masculinity' (Speer & Stokoe, 2011). Therefore, rather than seeing situated responsibility in specific instances as irrefutable evidence of a parent 'doing gender', we acknowledge that while it may be doing this, it may also have other functions (and work to 'do', for instance, class or ethnicity). We thus approach parents' situated conduct primarily as something that on an aggregated scale works to perpetuate ideas about gender in relation to parental responsibilities.

## Data and methods

The data for the study consist of 'naturally occurring' interaction, i.e. interaction that takes place regardless of the conducted research and that provides direct insight into everyday practices and how institutional encounters unfold (Mondada, 2014). Naturally occurring interaction is commonly used as data in, for example, conversation analytic studies, but is generally an underused data source in both qualitative and quantitative studies (e.g. in family studies). It can enable direct insight into interactants' conduct and what they treat as meaningful and relevant in particular situations (Potter, 2002). The examined data are drawn from three Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) customer service arenas where parents or prospective parents interact with social insurance case officers about parental benefit and parental leave: (a) 296 recorded phone calls; (b) 378 email exchanges; and (c) 615 threaded exchanges on the SSIA Facebook page for parents. Together with physical service centres, these three customer service arenas constitute the modes of contact that the SSIA offers. We have thus studied all service arenas that do not feature face-to-face interaction. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Board (Review number 2019-01727).

The phone calls were recorded in 2016 at two SSIA customer service call-centres, following informed, written consent by case officers. All callers were given oral information in a pre-recorded message while waiting for their call to be connected, and could then ask questions or opt out by telling the case officer. Such 'passive' consent may be seen as ethically problematic as it can be difficult for callers to raise the issue of non-participation when calling public authorities. However, it has the benefit of minimizing the study's impact on the way the calls are organized, which can be a problem with more extensive consent procedures in the beginning of calls, that risk derailing the institutional business at hand. Research of initial active consent procedures where call-takers ask callers for consent has also shown that these, too, may raise ethical questions about difficulties to decline (Speer & Stokoe, 2012). In the current study, all incoming calls received by

case officers who had consented (and where callers had not opted out) were recorded for one week. These were then transcribed verbatim, excluding identificatory details of both callers and call-takers for confidentiality reasons.

The emails were collected in 2019, consisting of incoming inquiries from clients who used an email form on the SSIA website, and case officers' replies to these, to which clients could not reply. Clients were given general information about the public nature of their emails on the email form, and were asked not to disclose personal information, whereas case officers were given oral and written information about the study and had the possibility to opt out. All emails are considered public documents according to Swedish law (see Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2024 for a discussion), meaning that they are available for anyone to request and read. Emails were de-identified by the SSIA before the researchers were given access, removing names, etc., to increase privacy for clients and case officers.

The Facebook data were collected in 2022, consisting of threaded posts on the official SSIA page for parents over three months. Like for the emails, these interactions are public documents, and the case officers were given oral and written information about the study and had the possibility to opt out, while clients were informed about the public nature of their posts on the Facebook page in question, and asked not to disclose personal information. In processing the data, we have removed names and other identificatory details, including hyperlinks to profiles.

The three data sets (i.e. email data; Facebook data; and telephone data) vary in terms of mode of communication (including both talk, for the telephone dataset, and writing for the email and Facebook datasets). They also vary in degree of publicness, representing both private (telephone and email) and publicly published interaction (Facebook). Analytically, these variations make it possible to capture patterns across the different arenas, as well as identify possible differences between them. Ethical considerations regard, for instance, where data fall on a private/public scale and the traceability of online texts (cf. Markham & Buchanan, 2012). That is, although the quotes in the article have been anonymized, they may be possible to find online (this particularly applies to the Facebook data). It is nevertheless important not to rewrite or fabricate quotes, as this would undermine the approach of studying authentic interaction and how it is organized from a members' perspective (cf. Ditchfield, 2021).

All data have been read or listened to, described, and coded based on the content, e.g. noting the parent's gender (where this could be discerned on the basis of names, voice quality, etc.), whether a contact was visibly made on behalf of the other parent, when in relation to the child's arrival the contact was taken, and whether the participants in their talk/writing oriented to the responsibility of finding information or administering the leave. These codes were then used for analysing the data both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative part of the analysis, we used the codes to generate descriptive statistics by calculating frequencies and using the chi-square (CHISQ.TEST) function in Excel to check whether observed differences between men and women were statistically significant. For the qualitative part of the analysis, data excerpts where parents specifically brought up the issue of their own or the other parent's responsibility for managing the child's care arrangements were collected and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible, descriptive method for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A benefit of using thematic



analysis for analysing naturally occurring interaction is that the data are not dependent on, e.g., interview questions that facilitate discussion about particular topics, but give insight into issues that participants – independent of the research – treat as relevant for the institutional business (Tegler et al., 2022). We used a variant that Braun and Clarke (2021) call ‘reflexive’ thematic analysis, i.e. an unstructured approach by which inductive codes are developed into increasingly abstract categories in a step-wise process. As they note, data within the resulting themes ‘should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91).

By combining qualitative and quantitative analyses of the same data, we can provide a better understanding of the gendered patterns in the responsibility that parents (or prospective parents) take for planning and managing parental leave. While the quantitative approach enables us to see the extent to which women’s responsibility for these issues differs from men’s, the qualitative approach gives us direct insight into the participants’ own displayed understanding of these patterns, as they make sense of them in service encounters.

## Findings

The analysis shows how women in Sweden take a major responsibility for information-seeking, planning and administration of parental benefit. The analysis is laid out in three sections. In the first, we provide an overview of women’s and men’s interactions with the SSIA, showing that women not only contact the SSIA more than men do, but that there are gendered patterns in the timing of their contacts too. In the second subsection, we show that women more often contact the SSIA on their partner’s behalf, practically taking responsibility as ‘administrator’. In the final subsection, we show how parents talking to SSIA case officers themselves attribute responsibility for administering parental leave to women.

### *Gendered patterns in parents’ institutional contacts about parental leave*

In our data, women consistently engaged in contacts with the SSIA to a larger extent than men did (see Table 1). One contact via Facebook was defined as one question and the subsequent reply/ies from practitioners and/or other parents, also including new messages posted by the parent who asked the initial question (i.e. either a question-response format or a thread). One contact via email was defined as one question and the subsequent reply from a practitioner (threaded interaction was technically disabled). Out of 1289 studied contacts, women made 981, or 76%, whereas men made 277, or 21%.

**Table 1.** Men’s and women’s contacts with the SSIA using the three studied channels.

	Facebook		Email		Phone	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Men	70	11.4	110	29.1	98	33.1
Women	545	88.6	238	63.0	198	66.9
Uncertain	0	0.0	30	7.9	0	0.0
<b>Sum</b>	<b>615</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>100</b>

Women's share varied somewhat between the various modes of contact: it was highest (88.6%) in the Facebook interactions, and slightly less in the telephone and email interactions (66.9% and 63%, respectively).

In addition, the timing of the contacts differed, as women contacted the SSIA before the birth or adoption to a higher degree than men did (see Table 2). Unclear cases – i.e. where participants did not make visible whether the child had arrived or not – have been excluded in this analysis (this applied to a total of 205 contacts across the three communication channels: 142 for women, 59 for men, and 4 where gender was uncertain or unspecified). In the data as a whole, women's share of pre-birth contacts across the three channels was 86.5%, whereas the corresponding figure for contacts after childbirth or adoption (including during or after parental leave) was 77.9%. Put differently, women were more overrepresented in the category of contacts taken early. The difference between women and men was significant (chi-square  $p$ -value: 0.005). Separate analysis of each data set (i.e. email data, Facebook data, and telephone data) also found a significant difference between men and women in terms of the timing of their contacts in relation to child birth or adoption, so that women to a larger extent made inquiries early on in this process than men did. Women's disproportionate share of the early contacts was largest in the telephone corpus (27% higher than the expected frequency based on women's overall share of phone calls to the SSIA), followed by emails (16% higher) and Facebook (12.5% higher).

In sum, our data indicate that women not only contact the SSIA to a larger extent than men do, they also tend to do so earlier in the process – at a time, in fact, when none of the parents have yet started their parental leave and would be expected to have similar interests in finding out how parental benefit works and start to make plans. The fact that men more rarely engage in service-seeking at this point is one way in which inequalities in the responsibility taken for this process materialize. Engaging in such service-seeking (or not) may thus be a way through which gender is done in the moment, while also contributing to reproducing such expectations (cf. West & Zimmerman, 1987). The differences observed between the different modes of contact are also interesting in this respect; it is particularly noteworthy that women rely on Facebook to a much larger extent than men do. The public nature of their interaction – i.e. that their Facebook 'friends' may see what they write to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency – means that their information-seeking is publicly displayed. To the extent that gender is done by engaging in such activities, it is done in front of a larger audience, and the stakes may thus be higher. In the next analytic section, we describe a related aspect, namely the extent to which men and women make contact on behalf of the other parent.

**Table 2.** Frequency table of the timing of men's and women's contacts with the SSIA, in relation to childbirth or adoption.

	Before			Later		
	Facebook	Email	Phone	Facebook	Email	Phone
Men	1	18	7	46	62	77
Women	54	65	47	369	140	145
Sum	55	83	54	415	202	222
TOTAL	192			839		
Women's share of total	86.5%			77.9%		

### **Making contact on behalf of the other parent**

We examined to what extent women and men administered parental leave on the other parent's behalf (see Table 3). Excluding instances where gender could not be discerned, we found that women to a larger extent did this: in the data as a whole, 23% of women's contacts with the SSIA were made on behalf of the other parent or the couple as a unit. The corresponding figure for men's contacts was 17%. This difference between men and women was significant (Chi-square  $p$ -value: 0.02). These findings confirm what has previously been suggested by case officers at the SSIA (Försäkringskassan, 2017).

When analysed separately, however, the different communication channels did not show consistent results. For the telephone data and Facebook data, similar significant associations were found as in the aggregated analysis. On Facebook, 26% of women's inquiries were made on behalf of the other parent and/or the couple as a unit, whereas the corresponding figure for men was 14%. The telephone dataset showed almost identical results: 27% of women's inquiries were made on behalf of the other parent whereas 14% of men's inquiries were. It should be noted that for the telephone dataset, 19 cases where the parent specified that the call was made on the other parent's behalf due to their inability to speak Swedish were excluded from this analysis. The reason for this was that we wanted to separate linguistic ability from responsibility for information-seeking and planning, since it is common that women in immigrant families do not speak Swedish (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2022). When including these calls, the association between the caller's gender and who the call concerned was no longer significant. It was not possible to restrict the email and Facebook data in the same way, since the issue of the other parent's linguistic abilities was not brought up by clients in these datasets. Finally, the email dataset showed a reversed association, i.e. men emailed the SSIA on behalf of the other parent or the couple as a unit to a somewhat larger extent than women did. However, this gender difference in email contacts on behalf of the other parent was not significant.

In sum, our data indicate that women take a larger responsibility for seeking information, planning, and administering parental benefit on behalf of the other parent or the couple as a unit. While the difference between men and women was not so large for the data as a whole, analysis of the phone corpus indicated that men's contacts on behalf of the other parent were more often claimed to be linked to their linguistic inability, which implies that the women's larger responsibility for such contacts might be underestimated in the aggregate analysis, as it was not possible to exclude such instances from the analysis of the email and Facebook modes of contact. Women's unpaid administrative work in this respect is an indication of gender inequality, and may be understood as a way in which gender is done (e.g. Cannito, 2020; Nyman et al., 2018). It is also something that may in itself contribute to perpetuating inequality, which we will return to in the concluding discussion.

**Table 3.** Contacting the SSIA on behalf of oneself or another/the couple as a unit.

	For oneself	%	For other/couple	%	Sum
Men	225	83%	45	17%	<b>270</b>
Women	727	77%	217	23%	<b>944</b>

### ***'I'm the one who's read': parents describe women as responsible for managing parental leave***

The patterns established in the previous two sections are supported by a thematic analysis of how parents talked or wrote about their responsibility for seeking information or administering parental benefit. Although there were individual variations, participants tended to orient to this responsibility as primarily in the mother's domain, and these instances were found only in women's interactions with the SSIA. The fact that men in our data did not orient to taking the main responsibility for the parental leave process in the same way as women did may be seen as an important finding in itself. It may be implicative of men taking less responsibility in this area (as the analyses in the previous sections suggest), but could also be seen as a way to 'do gender' in avoiding to make explicit the responsibility that is in fact assumed when contacting the SSIA. We identified four broader themes in the data that relate to different aspects of responsibility, namely: (a) Responsibility for knowledge about regulations, (b) Responsibility for strategic planning, (c) Responsibility for doing administrative tasks for the other parent, and (d) Giving tasks to the other parent.

The first theme, *Responsibility for knowledge about regulations*, describes how participants displayed responsibility for gathering information about regulations and institutional procedures in line with traditionally gendered expectations. At the same time, the parental leave was treated as a joint project and parents spoke of seeking parental benefit in terms of a 'we'. In the example below, the mother had called the SSIA to ask about the possibility for both parents to use temporary parental benefit to stay with their premature child in the hospital without the father having to use his allocated 'ten days'<sup>1</sup>:

#### Example 1 (ISSICS338)

- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| Mother: | Yeah, but that's good. Then ... So then he'll go online and then he just applies, skips them and then we submit those papers? |
| SSIA:   | Mm. Yes, exactly.   |
| (...)   |   |
| Mother: | That was it.  |
| SSIA:   | Well, have a good day.  |
| Mother: | Then I know.  |
| SSIA:   | Yes, that's nice ((laughs)).  |

After receiving the information, the mother in the first example concluded that the father would go online to apply for the benefit, and then 'we' would submit the papers. In this way, the mother distinguished between the father's task to apply (which he by law must do himself) and the process as a whole, which was depicted as done together. As they started to close down the call, the mother added 'Then I know' (Swedish: 'Då har jag koll'), thus shifting to her perspective, in which she was positioned as responsible for knowing what the father needed to do, thus also becoming responsible for relaying this information to him. In this way, the mother displayed responsibility for both parents' leave – something that may be seen as in line with traditionally gendered expectations about responsibility for managing childcare issues and might thus be understood as 'doing' gender – at the same time as she adhered to the strong norms of gender equality

for parental leave prevailing in Sweden, both by displaying the leave as shared and by practically enabling the father's leave.

The next example is another illustration of this theme. Here, a mother had called the SSIA with a range of general inquiries, and the case officer had given extensive information. The case officer then raised the issue of the father also needing this information:

Example 2 (ISSICS417)

- SSIA: So, basically everything there is to know about the parental insurance is there. Uh, and about these ...
- Mother: Okay.
- SSIA: these ten days, there's also some information there, but maybe he's already read because he ...
- Mother: No, he hasn't been in there at all. I'm the one who's read. ((laughs))
- SSIA: I see. Okay, you're the one driving this. Yeah, well ...
- Mother: Yes ((laughs))
- SSIA: ((laughs))

In the example, the case officer brought up the question of whether the father had sought information on the website (as the mother had). The case officer described where to find specific information that might be of particular interest to the father (the 'ten days') and suggested that he might already have read about that, thus displaying that this should be expected of fathers – but was not a given. In response, the mother acknowledged that he 'hasn't been in there at all' (i.e. on the SSIA website) and that she was 'the one who's read'. By such means, the mother displayed a gendered order of responsibility for gathering information about parental leave regulations in which the father did not take any part (at least not up to the point of calling). The case officer then reformulated this in terms of the mother taking responsibility for the entire process ('you're the one driving this'), thus acknowledging the parents' unequal division of responsibility for preparing for the parental leave. The joint laughter, furthermore, can be heard as displaying stance towards this arrangement as unequal and recognizably gendered (cf. Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2023). While the participants collaboratively enabled the mother taking the main responsibility for gathering knowledge, therefore, they also oriented to this as unequal. This may at the same time be understood as 'doing gender' and as subtly problematizing it (cf. Nyman et al., 2018).

The second theme, *Responsibility for strategic planning*, relates to the first theme in that it requires knowledge about the often complex regulations. In order to use the parental benefit's flexibility strategically, it may thus be necessary to first seek information about different scenarios. In the example below, a mother had written to the SSIA on Facebook about how her husband could navigate his working schedule so that he could use his allocated parental benefit without abstaining from work:

Example 3 (FB576)

Hi! I have a question, my husband works sometimes on call during a 7 day period and then has a free Friday when on call is over, can he take a parent day that Friday? He wants and needs to use days on the weekends but to be able to take sickness benefit level days he has to apply for at least three days in a row? So Fri-Sun or Sat-Mon? Otherwise only lowest level days will be approved?

Here, the mother displayed in-depth knowledge about parental benefit regulations, including the two types of days that have different compensation levels and may be used in different ways. Her question was about a specific scenario, which would maximize the father's income by letting him use parental benefit on days when he was off work anyway (thus depicting him as currently working full-time rather than being a primary caregiver, in line with traditional 'bread-winner' fatherhood ideals). The mother described the situation from the father's point of view: 'He wants and needs to use days on the weekends', thus clearly taking responsibility for navigating parental benefit regulations on his behalf. It should be noted that the phrasing that he 'needs' to use days implies that he had not used all his allocated days and that the mother had taken most of the parental leave, i.e. that they had an unequal childcare arrangement (cf. Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2023). This was not accounted for, thus treating the father's limited parental leave as unproblematic or 'normal'. In sum, the example shows how mothers would make visible taking considerable responsibility for fathers' use of parental benefit, which may be understood as doing gender.

The next example is similar. It is from a phone call from a mother, who asked about how the father might use his 'ten days' now that their child had just been born:

Example 4 (ISSICS694)

Mother: Yes, exactly. Then we start with the ten days and then, then we'll see what happens. But then there are no limitations on what I had in mind anyway. ((laughs))

SSIA: No, no. No, not in that way.

The mother here described the father's use of his 'ten days' as a joint concern ('we start'), but like in example 1, she then shifted to her own perspective to make visible how she had been the one thinking about different scenarios to maximize his use of the benefit ('what I had in mind'). By such means, the mother displayed taking on a primary responsibility for planning the parental leave on behalf of both herself and her partner. Again, this may be understood as doing gender, and is in line with previous research emphasizing how mothers are expected to facilitate the father's care work (cf. Cannito, 2020; Eriksson, 2008).

The third theme, *Responsibility for doing administrative tasks for the other parent*, captures the practical work of administering the parental leave, and the tendency that mothers take responsibility not only for their own benefit administration, but the other parent's as well, as discussed in the previous analytic section. The following example illustrates this. Here, a mother had written to the SSIA on Facebook, asking about the status of her application being processed.

Example 5 (FB606)

Hi, I did my application for parental benefit on the 11th of September, but when I go to planning on the social insurance agency's website it says that it's still being processed, no decision about payment no response from the social insurance agency. I first had to transfer days from my partner to myself, but that's finished a long time ago. Should it take this long!? (...)

While the mother in this case asked about her own application, she also mentioned that she had been the one who had administered the transfer of benefit days on her partner's behalf (which is technically not allowed). By such means, she did not only make visible an

unequal sharing of days (as the transfer of days implied that she would use more days than her partner), but also taking responsibility for the practical administrative tasks that enabled it. Both these aspects may be understood as doing gender, in the sense that the unequal division of days is in line with traditionally gendered patterns for childcare (cf. Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2023), as well as in treating the administration of her partner's business as something she would be unaccountably entitled to do, i.e. as something normal and expected. To what extent the latter aspect has to do with gender, or whether it is simply part of 'doing being a partner', is, however, not clear in the data. It should also be noted that although this theme is in line with the other generated themes, it was slightly less prominent in the data. This may have to do with the fact that each individual must administer their own parental benefit by signing in to the self-service system with a digital ID to verify their identity. That mothers at all described doing so on behalf of their partners is therefore notable.

The fourth theme, *Giving tasks to the other parent*, illustrates aspects related to the pattern that women more often contact the SSIA on the other parent's behalf, namely that they will receive information that they will need to relay to the other parent (cf. theme 1). In addition, this may imply taking on the responsibility to explicitly tell the other parent to do something, i.e. overseeing that something is done. Example 6 illustrates this pattern. Here, a mother had called in asking about the status of both her own application and the father's, and upon receiving the information that the father's employer had sent in the required documents, she replied that she did not need to ask him to 'nag on them' (to do it) then:

Example 6 (ISSICS237)

SSIA: Uh, it came in last week.  
 (...)
   
 Mother: So I don't have to ask Johnny to nag on them then. ((laughs))
   
 SSIA: No, you don't have to do that.

Displaying responsibility for making sure that the father's administrative processes would progress could, in this context, be understood as doing gender in the sense that the mother voiced being in charge of setting up the childcare arrangements, while in itself encouraging the father's leave and thus in practice contribute to more gender equal arrangements (cf. Nyman et al., 2018). The final example further illustrates this gendered responsibility by showing how it may be more clearly topicalized. The interaction comes from the last part of the same call featured in Example 2, where a woman expecting a child called the SSIA to ask a range of general questions about parental leave. In the following, the case officer questioned whether the father should not also be more involved in seeking information:

Example 7 (ISSICS417)

SSIA: Uh, so, I almost do think that he should actually ... Time flies you know, so it's always good to find things out and learn how it works and what rights you have and such.
   
 Mother: Yeah, exactly.
   
 (...)
   
 SSIA: Uh, and it's very complex and a lot, so one can't possibly like, take in everything at once but one has to do it in steps and such. Because it will make it easier for him then in the future.

- Like, further ahead when he will apply. Everything is much faster if one has information.
- Mother: Yeah, that's good. (...) Yeah, but I will ask him to read there so that he becomes a bit informed about it too.
- SSIA: Yeah, exactly, because it's ... Like I said, it's his benefit and his right to parental benefit too. (...) So it's certainly something that concerns him to the highest degree.

For our purposes here, we can note that the mother described that she would ask the father to go to the SSIA's website to learn more about parental benefit ('I will ask him to read there'). By such means, the mother made visible taking on the responsibility to make sure the father would also do his part in the planning process, something that may be understood as doing gender (cf. Cannito, 2020). Paradoxically, by encouraging the father's participation (which may support a more equal use of the parental leave long-term), the case officer also placed the burden of facilitating it on the mother. Like for the other identified themes, we thus see how gender is done within a context of 'doing gender equality' (cf. Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2023), which highlights how more traditionally gendered patterns may exist alongside gender equal ideals and how equality-promotive work may also encourage a traditionally gendered division of responsibilities, such as mothers taking responsibility for managing fathers' parental leave. In addition to these aspects, the example also illustrates some of the problems that may be associated with the patterns identified throughout the analysis as a whole, i.e. that the greater administrative responsibility taken by mothers – and the comparably lesser responsibility taken by fathers – may impact negatively on fathers' possibilities to practically navigate the complex regulations and make use of the benefit.

## Concluding discussion

By combining quantitative and qualitative analyses of naturally occurring contacts between parents and the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA), this study has provided new knowledge on situated, gendered responsibility for seeking information, planning, and administering parental benefit in Sweden. In line with previous research identifying mothers as the 'project leader in the family' (e.g. Alsarve, 2019; cf. Daly, 2002; Daminger, 2019; Hochschild, 1989) and as assuming responsibility for enabling men's parental leave (e.g. Cannito, 2020), our findings indicate that Swedish women take more far-reaching responsibility for such tasks than men do. Contacts with the SSIA constitute administrative work, and the identified patterns thus add to the general picture that women – also in Sweden – generally take a greater responsibility for unpaid housework and childcare (cf. Boye & Evertsson, 2015). Women's greater responsibility in this particular area is perhaps not so surprising given that they also tend to use more parental leave (cf. Duvander & Viklund, 2020), but we also show that they tend to contact the SSIA earlier in the process, compared to men. This may be due to the fact that women often start being at home with the child after birth, and it may thus be a more pressing concern for them to gain knowledge about regulations early on, than it is for men, who typically use parental leave later (Boye & Evertsson, 2018). These patterns point to a possible problem: if men seek less information about how parental leave works, and only later on seek information that enables strategic



planning, it restricts their possibilities to impact the total leave with a child as the use of parental benefit days during the first year limits flexibility in the coming years (cf. ISF, 2020). The observed patterns may thus have effects on how parental leave is divided between the parents long-term. Whether this is the case is an important question for future research.

The patterns in parents' activities can be understood as a way of 'doing gender', as women tend to take on responsibilities in line with traditionally gendered expectations related to childcare arrangements (cf. West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this sense, mothers' and fathers' situated practices in administrative processes may be part of a larger 'gender project' in relation to parenting. In addition to seeing information-gathering as a gendered task, which both the quantitative overview and the thematic analysis suggest, it may also be that knowledge about policy and administrative processes related to the care for children is itself important for 'doing gender' in this and in other contexts. This implies that it may be important for particularly women to know how these things work, to enable doing 'being a good mother', while such knowledge and practices may be less closely linked to normative fathering. Moreover, parents' practices in this respect may work to further stimulate such gendered expectations, i.e. to reproduce gender by reinforcing such ideals. In addition, we observed some differences between the different modes of contact, e.g. that mothers were more overrepresented in making contact on Facebook. As information-seeking contacts on social media render mothers' activities visible to others, their practices here may contribute to upholding gendered norms in this area. Moreover, we noted how parents also interacted with each other on the Facebook page, rendering this an arena not only for information dissemination but also for parental community. Mothers' larger over-representation here may thus mean that they have more wide-reaching opportunities for online social contacts with other parents related to parental leave planning, and may affect how fathers visiting the page feel about their belonging in what might be seen as a gendered space.

An interesting aspect made visible particularly in the thematic analysis is how gender is done within a context of 'doing gender equality' (cf. Höglund & Flinkfeldt, 2023), which highlights how more traditionally gendered patterns exist alongside gender equal ideals. This was seen in how equality-promotive work, such as encouragement of fathers' active participation, nevertheless implied a traditionally gendered division of responsibilities where mothers were positioned to do considerable informational, administrative, and pedagogical work vis à vis fathers. The analysis also illustrated how mothers would 'do gender' by displaying taking gendered responsibility for the process at the same time as the leave was treated as shared, and how both parents and case officers oriented to the patterned nature of women's responsibility in this respect, thus doing gender and at the same time problematizing it (cf. Nyman et al., 2018). This may be understood as related to Sweden's far-reaching state feminism and strong norms of gender equality for parental leave (Borchorst & Siim, 2008; Kaufman & Grönlund, 2021).

In addition to the administrative burden on mothers, they are also faced with the pedagogical task of relaying information to the other parent, and the thematic analysis has illustrated how mothers in our data take on this responsibility, with encouragement from SSIA case officers. Rather than just focusing on the use of parental benefit days, this points to the importance of acknowledging the full range of inequalities when it

comes to parenting, i.e. how the responsibilities of a parent stretch beyond the direct relationship with the child and how fathers may need to increase their share of such responsibilities to assume full parenthood (cf. Bekkengen, 2002). For instance, previous research has shown that women are expected to function as ‘a facilitator of the child–father relationship’ (Eriksson, 2008, p. 103). The results in this study point to how this also includes significant parts of the parental leave process (cf. Cannito, 2020).

A final reflection relates to the study’s limitations. The data were limited to the interactions themselves and what was visible or hearable in them. While this enabled unique insight into the gendered ways in which such contacts were actually conducted, it also meant that it was not possible to connect observed patterns to, for instance, parents’ sociodemographic characteristics or actual use of parental leave in individual cases. Given the results of the study, this is an important task for further research. Furthermore, given how both Swedish policy and the broader emphasis on gender equality stand out in international comparison (cf. Borchorst & Siim, 2008), the findings may not be directly transferable to other countries and parental leave policy contexts. However, the findings are nevertheless relevant for how to understand progress in the area of gender equality, as ‘what happens in a small well-ordered political democracy, socially progressive and economic (sic!) successful country on Europe’s periphery is of importance quite simply because if gender equality cannot be attained here, then what is the prognosis for the rest of the world?’ (Lane & Jordansson, 2020, p. 40). In showing how mothers in Sweden tend to function as ‘administrators’ in the area of parental leave, the study has shed light on women’s considerable responsibility for parental leave, and brought new knowledge on what might be one piece of the puzzle of the slow progression of gender equality in this area.

## Note

1. That is, the 10 days with temporary parental benefit that the parent who is not pregnant can apply for in connection with childbirth.

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## Ethics approval statement

The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2019-01727).

## ORCID

Marie Flinkfeldt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1751-1918>

Frida Höglund  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4497-6614>

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