Contemporary Trends in Parenting

This research into *contemporary trends in parenting* is exploratory. Its aim is to shed light on the modern-day forms of parenting that are taking shape between the groping-in-the-dark of social practices and current uncertainties of legal norms.

Many studies of emerging family forms highlight women's views. As a result, little is known about men in this field. The originality of the research approach that we chose was precisely to give priority to **tackling the subject from the male and masculine angles.** In a major departure from most studies of the subject, ours strove to grasp contemporary trends in parenting based on men's statements and viewpoints, with the aim of producing more elaborate significations concerning these developments.

To do this, we analysed the subject matter on two levels. The first level is that of the **institutional**, where the symbolic aspects of parenting are examined. For the most part, this approach examined the **legal strand** of parenting, based on analysis of how "normative discourse" is produced. This approach calls for exploring and comparing the laws and regulations that govern the formation, functioning, and possible breakdown of families. This approach via the legal sector postulates that law reflects collective representations to a certain extent and that the movements that are seen in them are likely to deliver information about currents in public opinion.

From a practical standpoint, given the variety of laws and draft legislation related to family and parental matters in Belgium, we mainly focused on those that were crystallised by the discussions conducted during the *Etats-Généraux des Familles* (EGF) or "Convention on Family Issues". The EGF took place from November 2003 to April 2004, at the initiative of the State Secretary in charge of families and people with disabilities at the time, Isabelle Simonis. This was a broad consultation that assembled political representatives from different levels of power, associations, academics, and administration staff to discuss family policy issues. This convention had two objectives, namely, to assess the country's family policies in the broad sense of the term and to make policy proposals that would be best designed to fulfil contemporary families' expectations. Neither the working parties, whose compositions were highly contingent on circumstances, nor the reactions of the public at large, who were invited to react to the work through an Internet site created for the occasion (www.lesfamilles.be), allow us to make any claims of representativity with regard to the opinions expressed and/or summarised in the various reports. Consequently, this material must be used with a certain degree of caution. Despite this obvious limitation, it seems to us that the material that we gathered in this way is an irreplaceable foundation for identifying the great contemporary discussions concerning the family and parenting.

The second level is the **practical level.** The goal was to apprehend the **diversity of today's forms of parenting,** to understand the different ways that individuals act when grappling with the reshuffling of filiation, while putting emphasis on the emerging forms of living and the difficulties that they encounter because of the material and normative contexts (moral and/or legal norms) in which they develop. Using a certain number of potentially problematic situations or key moments, we tried to analyse, from a comprehensive standpoint, how individuals managed to give meaning and identity to their families' configurations and roles as parents.

Concretely, the material consisted of interviews of some forty fathers who had to cope with situations that we felt were particularly enlightening about the stakes riding on

contemporary parental life experiences. These semi-directed interviews were conducted between May 2004 and February 2005 and lasted 90 minutes on average. Given such a sample, we obviously did not intend to measure the weight of any specific family configuration, given social demand, or even specific attribution of meaning. In the beginning, we gave priority above all to borderline cases in which extreme conditions (male transsexuals, gay fathers, fathers with large families, househusbands, homeless fathers, etc.) might have *revelatory* value, in the sense given to this adjective by Edgar Morin with regard to crisis situations. Seen from this angle, studying situations that are out of the ordinary has the advantage of being able to reveal the presence, form, or meaning of what ordinarily remains invisible. We subsequently tried to diversify the biographies of our interviewees by means of a systematic search for opposing cases in order to multiply the number of points of view on the issues that we studied (ways of taking on parental responsibilities, degrees and forms of reliance on experts in "family affairs", ways of connecting home life and work, etc.) and reach the saturation point, that is to say, the situation in which additional interviews would add no new information. The cases were diversified according to the following criteria: age, family configuration (matrimonial status, number of children, parental status), occupation, and level of instruction. At the end of the analyses, we were not certain that we had reached the saturation point. Consequently, this research remains exploratory more than ever.

The research consisted of an incessant to-and-fro between the two levels of analysis, *i.e.*, **the way changes in the parental daily life experience (practical level) were reflected in legal reforms and discourse about the family (institutional level) and vice versa**, for while many bills in Parliament seemed at first glance to dovetail with peoples' wishes as individuals, some of them nevertheless clashed with complex mechanisms that were deeply anchored in individuals and society. As we see it, the main stakes riding on contemporary changes in the family and parenting surface at those very moments when the law suddenly is out of phase with the individuals' wishes. Identifying these stakes revealed four guiding themes corresponding to four avenues of thought at the heart of the current parent-and-family problem complex. These themes, which were further broken down into sub-themes, served as our working categories to analyse our material.

This summary tackles each of these four branches of thought in succession. For each one we shall briefly set the stage, describe the main elements of the analysis of the legal debates and summarise what we have learnt from our analysis of the fathers' statements about their day-to-day parental experience.

1: The survival of the parental couple: a forced ideology?

In industrial society, the family was the horizon of each man and woman. Feelings were subordinated to the stability of one's marital and social status to the extent that the family order reflected the social order. The distinction between the parental axis and the conjugal axis had meaning, but did not appear to be as crucial as in the modern family, given that the child was inseparable from and the primary purpose of marriage. This model gradually gave way to another one founded on the values of personal fulfilment, authenticity, gender equality, and so on. The rationale that has presided over the founding of post-modern families is the search to satisfy the psychological needs of both members of the couple. The quality of their interpersonal relations has more value than the persistence of the family group. As a result, many questions arise. How does one create a lasting relationship in an era marked by the primacy of self-fulfilment? How does one found kinship solely on the frailty of human love? How does the family withstand the contractualisation of relationships? Etc.

Several studies showed that many people in Europe consider parents' responsibility for their children to be indeclinable, everlasting, and unconditional. Whatever happens, parents must meet their children's needs. This obligation for parents to guide their children to

independence is seen as being separate from their parental feelings and a limit on their desires, but also a limit on the process of the contemporary family's privatisation.

The tension between parental and marital norms lies at the very heart of this limit. There where parental ties are perceived as unconditional, marital ties, on the contrary, appear to be extremely fragile. The efforts that are required to keep the family cell united, whereas the partners' bonds of love with each other have disappeared, are no longer valued. Such a context of marital instability raises the question of the everlasting parental tie. How does one conciliate the values of freedom and independence that preside over marital relations with the value of responsibility that structures parental relations?

The need to find new common landmarks for marital relations and filiation is now being felt. In this regard, Irene Théry thinks that the "the freedom not to marry or to unmarry" that adults are now recognised to have" should be offset by institutionalising "the persistence of filiation". This refers back to the distinction between the conjugal couple and the parental couple, with the former being subject to the choices of the members of the couple, and the latter fated to become indissoluble (logic of everlastingness).

Only time will tell whether the model instituting the *parental* couple's indissolubility will spread or not. However, we can already single out some hesitations in the law and hesitant practices by the people who are concerned.

The joint parental authority act of 13 April 1995, which strives for educational and symbolic value, promotes the principle of the continuation of exercising parental authority jointly after and during the divorce procedure as well as in all cases of a couple's separation, whether they are married or not. This perspective prompts questions about the types of *divorce, alimony,* and *residential arrangements* preferred by the law, as the choice in favour of one or the other alternative can be decisive for the subsequent peaceable sharing of parental responsibilities.

In the matter of divorce, the lawmakers seem gradually to have become desirous of offering a framework in which it has become possible to divorce relatively peaceably, thereby keeping all chances for the ex-spouses to be able to continue functioning as a parental couple.

The divorce reform is marked by bills that are mainly concerned with abolishing divorce for fault. While the various bills sometimes vary considerably, with some of them refusing to drop all references to the notion of fault, many of them discuss ways to attenuate the strife that marks the spouses' relations. Even those who want to keep a place for conflicts in the procedure do legitimate their position in the name of the peace-making effect that this will have on the parties' later relations.

Fault is at the heart of the debate about awarding alimony. There is a proposal to do away with the link between fault and awarding alimony in the case of both divorce for fault and divorce for *de facto* separation. In this new scheme of things, alimony is seen as reparations for the inegalitarian consequences of the marriage, rather than punishment for the behaviour of one of the parties.

When it comes to the children's living arrangements, before 1965 marital fault had impact on the custody decision, the "bad spouse" was considered to be a bad parent. The principle of the obligation for each of the two parents to continue being responsible for their children and to encourage each other's parental responsibility, seems to have been upheld for more than the past ten years. The state has taken upon itself to ensure the dual filiation ties for all time by instating the principle of the joint exercise of parental authority. However, the modes of organisation of this coparentality are still to be specified. Some people propose applying the alternating, egalitarian residence scheme by default. Both the advocates and opponents of this proposal are using the argument of the degree of the relations' conflictuality to make their point.

There seems to be a consensus in legal circles about the desire to reduce the conflictuality of relations in order to support the parental couple. But some people point out the destructive effect of conflictual procedures, while others anticipate future relational difficulties caused by former conjugal tensions that were ignored by peaceful procedures.

Fathers have various difficulties in sharing parenting after divorce or separation. First of all, there are a small fraction of men who are totally out of step with the move towards privatising marriage that began more than thirty years ago and do not at all expect the law to intervene in favour of coparenting after divorce. Rather, they expect it to support the continuation of marriage, if necessary by making divorce harder.

Other fathers who do subscribe to the coparenting model still underline the gaps in the current situation, and above all their lack of recognition, as coparents, by the judicial institution. The lack of formal rules organising coparenting leads the judges to settle these matters in what may sometimes seem an arbitrary manner to the parties and does not encourage the parties to heed these decisions if the decisions are felt to be forced upon them, even unjust. The lack of markers concerning the post-divorce arrangements thus lead many "secondary parents" to feel put aside by an unfair system, and thus to marginalize themselves from the coparenting idea that was initially agreed upon. Some fathers also denounce the lack of recognition of coparenting by other institutions (schools, mutual insurance funds, hospitals, etc.).

However, the issuer of recognition, in particular recognition of the parent's authority, also concerns the former spouses. While the law provides for joint parental authority, the authority's effective legitimacy is contingent on the other spouse's compliance with and recognition of this authority. Now many fathers in our group said that their authority was taken away from them or delegitimised by the mother of their children. One of the main dangers of this process is the gradual abandonment of one's parental responsibilities, even the psychological eviction of one of the co-parents.

In the event of difficulties, the former spouses tend to reorganise around the child, at least up to a certain degree of conflict. We have to admit that the "best-interests-of-the-child" argument is used profusely to justify coparenting arrangements, by the parents as much as by the judges and psychologists. It seems to have acquired a highly legitimating status, to the point of sometimes masking the multicausality of decisions concerning coparenting's organisation.

Cooperation after divorce often comes up against another reality, that of the difficulty of separating parenthood from conjugality. This difficulty can take various forms. In some cases cooperation may have the effect of re-introducing a conjugal dimension, because the relationship is potentially resexualisable. The need for the "continuity of the parental couple at all cost" helps to keep conjugality and parenthood less far apart than the conventional custody scheme of permanent residence in one home, in which the noncustodial parent was often sidelined. In other cases, the determination to maintain the parental ties seems to handicap the formation of new couples. There, too, the links between parenthood and conjugality seem more complex than they appear at first sight. This allows one to understand how certain legal positions that consider the parental couple's survival to be obvious can be out of phase with the separated couple's actual situation.

Some fathers experience the break-up as highly dramatic. Perhaps the modern myth of love involves a dramatic ending by definition. Love has become a supreme value, the condition for a socially approved union. Consequently, expressing the deep wound that a break-up inflicts would be a fitting tribute to this value. Showing that one finds it hard to recover from a break-up and turn what was once love into coparenting would in a way be a

way to consecrate the past love. In contrast to the "successful divorce ideology", here we find the traces of a "painful break-up ideology".

When faced with the effervescence of the concrete, settling a parental couple's organisation by wiping the past marital slate clean seems difficult to do when there is an imperative to remain "a couple", be it parental or not. If we extend this intuition, the "parents' transformation into "co-parents" should go hand in hand with efforts to "turn the spouses into ex-spouses". The interviewees seem to have felt that such a transformation was necessary to be able to "go on to something else". The legal procedures should consider reorganising certain areas so as to allow the moderate expression of the grudges and guilt feelings that are likely to gnaw at modern lovers and endanger their future coparenting.

2. Social and moral guidance for the parents' roles

In analysing the institutional debate about family affairs, we see that guidance is a key issue, caught between growing interventionism and parental empowerment. The emergence of the notion of "parenting", which refers to "the function of parent that takes the father's and mother's legal, moral, and educational responsibilities into account" is emblematic of this trend. The principle of "reparentalisation", which refers to the policies instituted, in particular by the public authorities and their experts, to "restore" the parental function, says a lot about this tension. Moreover, it is reflected in the implementation of a series of parenting assessment and support measures. These measures are intended to compensate for the existence of parenting "deficits". Legislative developments regarding divorce conventions are exemplary in this regard. The divorce law of 30 June 1994 limited the freedom of divorced parents by having the Prosecutor's Office and court verify the content of the prior agreements concerning the spouses' common children, to safeguard the latter's interests. We can observe that the courts are in the process of empowering a series of experts (social workers, psychologists, family mediators, etc.) to provide such family guidance.

The growing framing of parental roles partly refers to their transformations. The way of being a parent have considerably changed compared to what our parents experienced. Family socialisation must henceforward participate in asserting the individuality of each family member. At a time when some social discourses tend to point the existence of a "parental dismissal", our interviews reveal that parents are not placing the matter of their responsibility on the back burner of their concerns. Parenting and parenthood have become a life target and constitutes a project of success for a good number of parents. The fathers whom we interviewed have reflexive relations with their parental roles and the ways to take them on. The child's best interests are central in the parental roles, as indicated by the concern for giving priority to the ingredients that are propitious for building the child's identity. The high level of reflexivity of parents regarding their parental roles and the transformation of what's expected from the parents may destabilize them. They will have continually to adapt themselves when confronted to the complexity of the educative function and the difficulties they face. This adaptation capacity will lie upon the possibility to mobilise educative references.

The modifications affecting the transmission of parental knowledge at home contribute to these difficulties According to the German sociologist SCHULTHEIS, the modern era is characterised by a transition in legitimate knowledge's reference frameworks. This is the transition from "folk models" - based on knowledge that is legitimated as "traditional" – to "expert models" – based on knowledge that is legitimated as "scientific". These changes in the transmission of parental knowledge mark today's parents' autonomy from the intangible traditional references of yore. The parents may thus search outside the family for that which was traditionally transmitted inside the family. But the social and normative environment nevertheless does not seem to supply the security that the parents expect. The multiplicity of

references may cause a dilemma between various injunctions that are often contradictory. The parent confronted to a myriad of possible choices may feel more helpless.

Despite this, the interviews show that the individual's use of expert references remains important. They look for scientific legitimacy, neutrality and externality or outside opinions. The analysis of our respondents' statements adds some touches to the expert knowledge's central position in learning parental skills. While relying on expert knowledge continues to seem to be effective for many individuals, we see the emergence of criticism of this "expert" knowledge's legitimacy, sometimes as a result of negative experiences at the "access points". These access points are points of contact between the layman and these expert systems' representatives. These moments of meeting between the daily world and social assistance systems rest upon a "trust versus mistrust" tension with regard to the aid system.

The type of relation between the expert and the user seems problematic. Given the major obligation that they have to produce results, especially when they are the subjects of special measures, parents feel that their "way of being a parent", *i.e.*, parenting, is being judged. In sliding from a system of assistance to a system of oversight, the asymmetrical structure of the interactions can set the stage for power relationships. That is one of the reasons that prompt some parents to turn to a third source of learning familial knowledge, *i.e.*, informal exchanges with close friends and relatives. The difference between informal exchange and the use of experts lies in the possibility of a dialogue, and in the fact that the parent positions himself as an actor of the change he's expecting. Relying on informal exchanges gives individuals the possibility to avoid relying on asymmetrical parenting aid (that is, tradition and experts). That is why such individuals end up looking for a symmetrical form of aid.

This "alternative" use highlights one of the issues of parents' relation to the experts. It supposes that parents are in search of a certain symmetry when they turn to experts. What they want to avoid at all cost is to feel that they are being supervised from the outside, as this can undermine their confidence in their parenting abilities. Any relationship of assistance or control that involves an asymmetrical relationship may only thwart such an objective. We can assume that the logic of control will only be exacerbated if there is collusion between the therapeutic system and the legal system. If that is the case, is it possible to design interventionist measures that can institute a symmetrical relationship between the system and the individual to whom these measures apply? The idea of a clearer separation between the legal and therapeutic fields may seem to be an interesting avenue to explore.

3. The complexity of filiation: What to do with the additional parents?

Although the nuclear family remains a reference for thinking about contemporary family relationships, the diversity of family structures forces us to question the obviousness of filiation. Fewer and fewer children are living in families headed by married parents, while more and more are living in single-parent families, reconstituted or blended families, and families with cohabiting parents.

Besides reconstituted families following break-ups, other types of family configurations have arisen due to the rise in the possibilities of having children other than by natural ways. So, simple or full adoption, foster parents, artificial insemination with a third-party donor, and same-sex parents are gradually taking up positions on the family stage. They issue new challenges to the apparent obviousness of "nuclear filiation", just as they underline its multidimensionality, given that the biological, domestic, and genealogical (or symbolic) components of filiation are not combined in the father and the mother.

Faced with this burst of different family forms, the courts appear to be more and more at a loss to define what is a parent. The challenge for the courts is gradually to invent *de jure*

multiparenthood, that is to say, to create a place for family relations in the world of kinship when filiation is unclear. The issue of multiple parents underlines with great acuity the distinction between the idea of *replacing* one parent with another and the idea of *persistence*, where different people in charge of parenting may coexist.

The law takes different positions with regard to the new forms of kinship, depending on the family configuration involved. When the biological component is not mobilised to justify the status of parent, then the domestic component is, and in some cases both components are recognised. The biological "truth" is mobilised in contradictory ways, depending on which situation is involved. Similarly, the domestic component, which alone justifies filiation in the case of adoption, is not mobilised at all when it comes down to defining the stepparent's status in a reconstituted family. And the draft legislation examined at the Convention on Family Issues and debates to which they gave rise also attest to the legal hesitations in this area. Some of them bear the traces of a judicial context that consecrates the impossibility of the second spouse's role, whereas others are grounds for believing that the situation is changing. The hesitant affirmation of additivity is found in, *inter alia,* a bill providing for the creation of legal recognition of the second spouse as a "second parent" that was put forward in December 2003. Similarly, the bills encouraging reform of the social kinship system continue to use very timid language when it comes to considering adding bits of kinship.

The admittedly hesitant moves towards adopting an additive logic that draft legislation has made in recent years entail embracing a certain form of multiparenthood and -parenting. However, it is doubtless advisable to distinguish between multiple parents from the functional and legal standpoints. This is because the additive logic can be mobilised to achieve two different objectives: either to recognise *de facto* multiparenting (generally linked to sharing the domestic component) and give each of the protagonists a status or to defend *de facto* kinship (linked at least to filiation, if not to the biological component) and/or safeguard the status of biological parents who have been taken out of the picture. It can even be mobilised to achieve both objectives at the same time.

According to the fathers whom we interviewed, the matter of what characterises the "true" parent reveals a constant tension between the biological and domestic components, for one or the other was invoked at different points to justify the family configuration being considered. The case of reconstituted families is paradigmatic of the conflict between these two components of filiation. The domestic component is largely mobilised to illustrate the tie that develops between a child and her/his stepparent. Nevertheless, the biological parent is the only one to have this place in filiation, regardless of her/his parental investment. In some cases, biological filiation confers a sort of right of precedence. The biological (or "original") father's place plays a part in creating the stepfather's role.

Additivity seems to garner greater support when it concerns multiparenthood as defined by the law rather than multiparenting, as it is predominantly the case for adoption or artificial insemination with anonymous donor. The low probability of the biological parents' re-entering the parental picture seems however likely in both cases to rule out all fears of interference from them. In the opposite, in the case of foster homes the original parents' presence and potential return of their children leads the foster parents to act with a certain degree of caution. Here, the foster parents' emotional investment appears to be made largely in relation to the original parents' investment and probability that the child will return to his/her original parents.

Many of our interviewees stressed the importance of the child's origins, sometimes combined with blood ties, as threads that individuals can follow to find their places in history through their family lineages. The purpose of belonging to a vaster historical and temporal

dimension might be to recreate longer-term identity, to restore significance to family ties that can no longer be taken for granted and have become ephemeral and fragile. The fathers insisted on the role of origins in identity building: "Genealogical discontinuity" was deemed negative and "continuity" was seen as structuring identity. The maintenance of the family's memory, the transmition of heritage, be it cultural or material, the place and role of grand-parents etc. are interpreted in terms of family continuity and are valorised as sources of stability.

When it comes to multiple parents, one source of problems mentioned often by our respondents is the confusion of parental, generational, professional, or sexual roles. Many cases of reconstituted families reveal a certain uneasiness with the definition of the stepfather's role. The stepfathers all concur that they do not fill the same role as the father and do not think they should. But beyond that, opinions diverge. Who is entitled to exercise authority? When family problems occur, the grandparents' availability and the help that they give tend to be appreciated. Nevertheless, the boundary between the feeling of help and the feeling of interference seems to be crossed rather quickly. In the case of intervention by social assistance professionals, some fathers also brought up the lack of relations between the family and the institutions. Finally, another type of confusion mentioned by some of our respondents concerns the roles that are "traditionally" or "culturally" linked to one or the other gender.

The argument of the child's best interests, sometimes in tandem with that of the confusion of roles, is often mobilised to justify their reluctance to accept certain family configurations. The "clincher", for some of them, was that the risk of being stigmatised because of the lack of social recognition of this type of kinship was contrary to the best interests of the child.

When multiple parents, same-sex parents, transsexuality, etc., are considered to be so many situations that help to blur pre-established social landmarks, the phrase "But where are we heading?" that some of our respondents uttered reflects their fear of seeing a foreign world for which they do not have the keys of understanding spring up around them. Assigning names to these new forms of parenthood and parenting is considered to be imperative to be able to recreate coherence and a logic of functioning on the ruins of the former experience. Where words are lacking, uneasiness prevails. The legal discourse plays a crucial role in this necessary symbolisation process, even though it is not sufficient.

4. Connecting home life and work

Far from being a minor phenomenon, the problem of combining work and family is at the heart of contemporary transformations. Indeed, the changes that have occurred in work and family require rearranging the ties between these two spheres. Not only have the rise in the percentage of working women and end of the "breadwinner father" model's predominance affected the connections between work and family, but the increasing importance of single-parent families, flexibility and intensification of work, continued gender inequality in employment, ageing of the population, and so on, are also affecting this relationship. Many people thus feel that they have to juggle contradictory imperatives, are handicapped on the labour market, or suffer because they cannot find a satisfactory way to meet their various commitments. Today, there is more support for a weakly gendered cumulative model, where investing in one's work and investing in the family are not considered to be incompatible.

One of the conditions of the "cumulative" model is to broaden men and women's degree of freedom regarding the need to sell their labour on the market in order to achieve acceptable living standards. This is a condition of "decommodification" of labour, made possible by various schemes (for example, working time regulations, right to leaves, suitable minimal wages and social benefits, etc.). The cumulative model also involves giving people more freedom when it comes to taking on their family responsibilities and tasks. This

condition is that of the "defamilialisation" of family requirements, that is, that the family's needs do not have to be met exclusively by the family's members.

In Belgium, some types of institutional support for combining family life and work incarnate these ideas. The various types of leave and shortening or suspending work time via time credits are examples of decommodification, whereas setting up daycare facilities for children is an example of defamilialisation. A series of proposals was made during the debates that took place in the 2004 Convention on Family Issues that also took the line of greater decommodification of workers in close conjunction with keenness to achieve gender equality. These proposals include encouraging men to take leaves (via more state intervention) and making working time more flexible (provided that this is governed by collective agreements). The various proposals aimed at improving access – in terms of numbers of places and costs - to daycare facilities, for their part, are examples of the defamilialisation line.

Yet implementing a gender-neutral, cumulative model seems difficult. Women remain the main users of the various schemes for combining work and family. Our analyses of the experiences related by our respondents remind us that the players are people of flesh and blood, not passive subjects who are easily swayed in one or the other direction. That being so, they must deal with constraints over which the public authorities may not necessarily have direct control.

The field study revealed the leading role played by the economic imperatives with which families are faced. The possibility of availing themselves of special leaves or time credits simply was not an option for many of the fathers in our sample, due to the financial impact that such a choice would have on the household's (or single parent's) income.

Our survey also revealed how deeply traditional norms of the sexual division of labour are rooted in individuals' (men's' and/or women's) attitudes. Men's desires to reduce their career investments to take care of their children and/or the household can thus sometimes be stymied by their wives, who take these wishes for paternal investment for intrusions in their domains. Inversely, some fathers are reluctant to get more involved in an area that has until now been reserved for women. Nevertheless, it appeared in the course of the interviews that the men who said they were "new fathers" found it much less difficult to be more involved in childcare than their predecessors, although this did not carry over to housework. And even when changes were detected, we often found that the women in these households continued to carry more of the weight when it came to making decisions about and organising the household chores. The statements that we gathered from our self-proclaimed "new fathers" underlined their attempts to give taking on household chores a positive meaning by minimising this work's arduousness and the fact that it has to be done (this was done by accentuating the consensual and freely chosen nature of the distribution of these chores).

One last aspect we must single out refers to the measures aimed at encouraging and facilitating the use of childcare services. Indeed, such outsourcing may run against the grain for parents who feel that it is important to take care of their children themselves. This can be reflected in behaviours ranging from limiting the time spent in a crèche (which some parents recognise as being useful for socialising young children) to mistrust and outright rejection of such solutions. This desire can be accompanied by guilty feelings when the parents have no other option but to entrust their children to someone else, be it a daycare facility, grandparents, or friends.

Today, it seems to be commonly accepted that handling work and a family no longer means that women must give up the former. Of course, we have a long way to go before

deeply ingrained individual and collective representations and practices can be uprooted. The Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, have tried to attack such stereotypes through various measures, such as waging a broad media campaign featuring male politicians and their children and developing strong political messages stressing the fact that each parent loses out if parental leave possibilities are not used. It would be worthwhile to think about instituting similar measures in Belgium, while taking care that they attack ingrained ideas about housework as well as childcare. Other awareness-raising campaigns could target businesses in order to make employers aware of the positive effects of setting up schemes to improve ways to combine work and family for men and women alike. The Belgian campaign to promote paternity leaves (*Congé de paternité. Choisir d'être présent* or "Paternity leaves: Choosing to be there.") launched by the Institute for Gender Equality is a first example of this.