



Issue description

Committee: Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee

Issue: The issue of parental leave

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Introduction:

Maternity leave has been a practice as early as the 1800s and policies regarding it were enacted to protect the physical health of working women and their babies at the time of childbirth since then. However, parental leave has become available as a legal right and/or governmental program in most countries only in the last few decades as supplements to existing maternity leaves, to create real alternatives to out-of-home infant care and to facilitate gender equity. During this time, as mothers have increasingly entered the workforce, paid maternity leave has gained greater salience and many countries introduced parental leave regulations in order to counteract low and decreasing birth rates by making parenthood more attractive and more compatible with a working career, especially for women. Despite these, many women still lack access to a period of paid leave before and after childbirth in addition to the large majority of women workers (around 830 million) in the present world who do not have adequate maternity protection. Almost 80 per cent of these workers are in Africa and Asia. The lack of sufficient help provided to women in such vulnerable times such as pregnancy, childbirth and maternity can lead to far-reaching consequences. Not only do they require special protection of their own and their infant's health and time to recover after childbirth, but they also need to devote time to nursing their children. At the same time, they require protection to ensure that they will not lose their job simply because of pregnancy or maternity leave. Such protections should ensure equal access to employment, the continuation of income and therefore economic security, and prevent job discrimination. Nonetheless, women still have to face different forms of maternity discrimination and other threats at their workplace besides the challenges of childrearing. The subjective norms of such tasks being regarded as the duty of mothers further reinforce gender inequality through payment penalties after returning to work, disadvantaged career opportunities and the hardships of reconciling work and family life. Hence, in order to establish a family-friendly environment, employers should take into consideration female employees' needs and implement parental leave policies accordingly.

Definition of key terms:

Parental leave/ Family leave

The employment-protected leave of absence for employed parents in order to care for newborns. It includes maternity, paternity and adoption leave, however, it can also refer to the supplementary leave period following maternity leave. In some countries parental leave is generally a sharable family entitlement but with certain periods reserved for use by the mother or father, while in others extra paid weeks are offered if both parents use a certain portion of the family entitlement. Often, the minimum benefits and eligibility requirements are stipulated by law.



Maternity leave/ Pregnancy leave

The employment-protected leave of absence for employed women around the time of childbirth, or adoption in some countries. The ILO convention on maternity leave stipulates the period of leave to be at least 14 weeks. In most countries beneficiaries may combine pre- with post-birth leave; in some countries a short period of pre-birth leave is compulsory, as is a 6 to 10 week leave period following birth.

Paternity leave

The employment-protected leave of absence for employed fathers at or in the first few months after childbirth. Paternity leave is not stipulated by international convention, therefore it is significantly less frequent than maternity leave. In general, periods of paternity leave are much shorter than for maternity leave. Because of the short period of absence, workers on paternity leave often continue to receive full wage payments.

Adoption leave

The employment-protected leave of absence for employed parents following an adoption. It should have the same duration and conditions as the leave granted after childbirth, however, it is only offered in some countries.

Home care leave

Also called childcare or child raising leave. The employment-protected leaves of absence that sometimes follow parental leave and that typically allow at least one parent to remain at home to provide care until the child is two or three years of age. Home care leaves are less common than the other types of leave and are offered only in a minority of OECD countries. They are also often unpaid, and where a benefit is available the home care leave tends to be paid only at a low flat-rate.

Motherhood penalty

The term coined for the phenomenon that working mothers generally encounter systematic disadvantages in pay, perceived competence, and benefits relative to childless women. Mothers may also suffer worse job-site evaluations indicating that they are less committed to their jobs, less dependable, and less authoritative than non-mothers. Thus, mothers may experience disadvantages in terms of hiring, pay, and daily job experience.

Maternity discrimination

It includes treating a woman unfavourably on the grounds of her pregnancy, childbirth or maternity leave. All employees, casual workers, agency workers, freelancers and contractors should be protected by law from unfavourable or detrimental treatment, such as selection for redundancy or dismissal because of the changes to the mother's job during her absence on maternity leave, refusal of training or promotion opportunities, reduction of pay or hours, pressure to resign and demotion on return to work.

Postpartum depression

Also called postnatal depression. It is a type of mood disorder experienced by mothers or fathers after childbirth. Symptoms may include extreme sadness, low energy, anxiety, crying episodes, irritability, and changes in sleeping or eating patterns. PPD can also negatively affect the newborn child. While the exact cause of PPD is unclear, it is presumably due to physical and emotional changes such as hormonal changes and sleep deprivation.



Earned-carer society

A social arrangement in which women and men engage symmetrically in paid work and unpaid caregiving and where young children have ample time with their parents.

General overview:

Payment, funding and economic effects

In most countries, a few weeks of paid or partially paid parental leave is offered, followed by longer unpaid parental or family leave when an employer is required to hold an employee's job while that employee is taking leave. Paid parental or family leave provides paid time off work to care for or make arrangements for the welfare of a child or dependent family member. The three most common models of funding are social insurance/social security (where employees, employers, or taxpayers in general contribute to a specific public fund), employer liability (where the employer must pay the employee for the length of leave), and mixed policies that combine both social security and employer liability. According to research, more than 100 countries finance benefits through social security or public funds, reducing employer's liability, which is detrimental to women's opportunities in the labour market.

Research on existing paid leave programs suggests that paid leave leads to negligible costs to employers in terms of temporary employee replacement costs or overtime paid to existing employees, while it incentivizes labour market attachment for women and hence increases the likelihood that workers will return to work after childbirth, improves employee morale, has no or positive effects on workplace productivity, reduces costs to employers through improved employee retention, and improves family incomes. Research further suggests that expanding paid leave is likely to have economy-wide benefits such as reduced government spending on public assistance and a rise in government revenues due to the higher rates of female labour force participation (affecting GDP and national productivity), which would generate a larger pay income tax. Paid parental leave incentivizes childbirth, which affects the future workforce. However, it is argued that in aging societies it might be harmful to children's welfare as they are born because they are expected to support their parents.

Parental leave policies around the world

According to a research conducted by International Labour Organization, all countries except Papua New Guinea have laws mandating some form of parental leave. A different study showed that of 186 countries examined, 96% offered some pay to mothers during leave, but only 81 of those countries offered the same for fathers. The United States, Suriname, Papua New Guinea, and a few island countries in the Pacific Ocean are the only countries in the United Nations that do not require employers to provide paid time off for new parents. From these, the United States is the only high-income country that does not mandate paid leave for mothers of new-borns. Nearly every member of the European Union (EU) provides at least 14 weeks of job-guaranteed paid maternity leave, during which workers receive at least two-thirds of their regular earnings (International Labour Organization 2010). Several high-income countries also provide workers with the option to combine part of the paid parental leave entitlement with paid employment, facilitating a gradual return to work for mothers, as well as a greater take up of leave provisions by fathers.

There has been a gradual global shift towards maternity leave periods that meet or exceed the ILO standard of 14 weeks: the majority of countries now provide leave duration in line with Convention No. 183. Many states are considering extending leave periods, however, analysis showed that benefits in more than half were neither financially adequate nor sufficiently long-lasting. Expanding coverage in law and in practice is critical for the approximately 830 million



women workers who are not adequately covered in practice, mainly in developing countries. In Asia and the Pacific, the majority of countries offer merely unpaid leave for both parents, while in Africa many fathers get no paternity leave at all or others are offered a meagre 2-10 days.

The effects of maternity leave

Universal parental leaves with job protection and earnings compensation increase women's labor market attachment as well as improve the health of children, but very long leaves may have negative consequences at both individual and societal levels.

Effects on the labour market and economy

Parental leave can lead to greater job security. There is some evidence that legislation for parental leave raises the likelihood of women returning to their previous jobs as opposed to finding a new job. However, duration of leave and other factors can considerably influence parents' return to work. Studies show that if a parent is gone for more than a year after the birth of a child, it decreases the possibility that he or she will return. Other studies of shorter leave periods show that parents no longer need to quit their jobs in order to care for their children, so employment return increases. Nevertheless, in other instances when the leave is too short, mothers may not feel ready to return to work and may drop out of the workforce. On the societal level, the suboptimal use of the workforce is likely to result in lower rates of economic development. In regard to employers, mandated maternity leave legislation could have potential drawbacks as it might disrupt productive activities by raising rates of employee absenteeism.

Gender equality

There is a prediction for statistical discrimination on the basis of the fact that the cost of hiring women of child-bearing years is anticipated to increase either because the employer is mandated to pay for maternity leave, or because she will be absent from work on public leave. Evidence shows that since women are more likely than men to take long parental leaves, employers have a strong incentive to hire men. Hence, the demand for women in the labour market will decrease despite gender discrimination being illegal. Furthermore, long parental leaves can have ill effects on women's opportunities for promotion and lifetime earnings compared to their male or childfree counterparts. Evidence suggests that they are penalized for taking paid maternity leave, particularly when the leave is generous. Their career prospects may be destroyed as time away from the labour market deprives them of the chances to gain experience and win promotion. This is known as the "motherhood penalty", which causes a growing debate in Europe about whether parental leave should be short or long. Evaluating the impact of short parental leave on mothers' employment status and subsequent wages, it was shown that full-time short paid parental leave had almost no effect on labor market participation and wages of first mothers at the global level. To sum up, the problem with attempting to impose gender equality with laws and mandates is that such policies often have unintended consequences that actually do the opposite of what reformers trying to accomplish.

Therefore, it is needed to offset the potential negative effects on women's labour supply of long parental leaves by policies targeted especially at fathers, and policies making formal day-care cheaper and more easily available. However, it does not appear that parental leave policies have had a significant effect on the gender wage gap, which has remained relatively steady since the late 1980s. The reason for this is that the introduction of transferable leave appears to be fair and equal in theory as it does not specifically allot childcare to women and even allow the family to choose, but in practice it leads to the majority of women using most of the parental leave. Thus, the issue of mandatory paternity leave has received attention as



the role of fathers in childrearing and sharing the care burden has been emphasized. With the support of fathers, women's potential to reconcile work and family life could be enhanced.

Paternity leave

While gaining ground in Europe, the shared parental leave policy, which aims to help women return to the workplace and men to become more involved in caring for new babies, is unknown in much of the world. Some large countries, for example China and India, allow no leave, paid or unpaid, for fathers at all. According to a UNICEF analysis, 2 in 3 infants live in countries where fathers are not entitled to a single day of paid paternity leave. Contrarily, some states such as Norway, Sweden and Iceland have already adopted a so-called "father quota" that reserves part of the parental leave period exclusively for fathers. This regulation is vital for a more equal division of labour as mothers continue to take the majority of guaranteed parental leave. When guaranteed leave is unpaid, research indicates that men's leave usage is unaffected. Another reason for their reluctance to go on paternity leave is that owing to traditional social attitudes they might be illegally discriminated against for taking or requesting leave for family responsibilities. To eliminate such phenomena, governments should implement national family-friendly policies that support early childhood development – including paid paternity leave – to help provide parents with time, resources and information they need to care for their children.

Effects on health and child development

Numerous studies have shown that allowing time to parents with a new-born constitutes a significant investment in child development and makes the child and the parents healthier, both physically and mentally. Recent research suggests that the importance of parents' presence during infancy is crucial for a child's health and psychological growth. It was shown that paid parental leave reduces the frequency of low birth weight and also contributes to a decrease in infant mortality rates as mothers have more time to invest in taking care of their babies. In a research conducted in the US, they found that children whose mothers returned to work in less than twelve weeks fared worse on a number of health and development outcomes. They were less likely to have had regular medical check-ups, less likely to be breast fed for a sufficient period of time, less likely to have had all their immunizations by age 18 months, and if their mothers worked full-time, were more likely to have behaviour problems at age four. Creating close bonds with both parents in the first year of life is an important factor to a child's psychological health. When a caregiver consistently responds to an infant's needs, a trusting relationship and lifelong attachment develops. This sets the stage for the growing child to enter healthy relationships with other people throughout life and to appropriately experience and express a full range of emotions. Babies who are held and comforted when they need it during the first six month of life tend to be more secure and confident as toddlers and older children. Environmental factors are also likely to be significant in the formation of learning skills, self-esteem, and emotional security. The mother's absence during the first year of life could disrupt mother-child attachment and deprive the child of the stimulation that promotes cognitive development. Yet, not only



mothers but fathers' leave, take-up of family responsibilities and early interaction with their children are directly related to successful child development: when children positively interact with their fathers, they have better psychological health, self-esteem and life-satisfaction in the long-term. Fathers taking their share from household responsibilities also reduce maternal stress and anxiety caused by the difficulties of balancing work and family life.

A mother's emotional wellbeing and mental health is another important factor in child development. Some authors have estimated that full recovery from childbirth can take up to six months, including time for mothers to recover their strength and energy levels. Complications in establishing healthy patterns and maternal self-confidence were evident when mothers experienced post-partum depression and/or anxiety, maternal fatigue, poor general health, limited spousal and social support, and were returning to work earlier than they wish to. However, research showed that an appropriate duration of maternity leave can help prevent maternal depression and stress. But in several cases limits on the duration of job protection and a low benefit level, force women to return to work before the end of the maximum benefit period. Over the past decade trends such as minimal increases in young family incomes, greater employment volatility, and welfare reform initiatives have placed economic pressure on parents to re-enter the labour force early, depriving them from adequate interactions with their children.

Single parents

Many studies have examined the availability of paid parental leave for the general population, but few have looked specifically at whether leave policies meet the needs of single parents. Depending on policy framing, parental leave benefits may not meet the needs of parents and children in single-parent families. Results of a research indicated that single mothers receive shorter durations of paid leave compared to two-parent families in 22 countries after the birth of a child; for fathers, this number rises to 29. Therefore, it is not surprising that single mothers are likely to have mental health issues, financial hardships, live in a low income area, and receive low levels of social support. While two parents usually share responsibility and monitoring of the child, a single parent must be the sole economic and parenting resource and must stretch to cover both domains. Often, a single parent has less regular interaction and involvement in day-to-day activities of the child. This situation makes their children highly disadvantaged. Research shows that children reared in single parent families do not fare as well as children reared in two parent families, on average they are more likely to experience increased academic difficulties and higher levels of emotional, psychological, and behaviour problems.

Major Parties Involved:

International Labour Organization (ILO)

The ILO is a UN agency responsible for setting international labour standards. It has taken several steps towards maternity protection by introducing regulations on parental leave including the Maternity Protection Convention of 2000. Its Database of Conditions of Work and Employment Laws provides a picture of the regulatory environment of working time, minimum wages and maternity protection in more than 100 countries around the world, and the ILO Maternity Protection Resource Package provides guidance and tools to strengthen and extend maternity protection to all women in all types of economic activity.



UNICEF

UNICEF is a UN organization that has conducted vast amount of research to evaluate child welfare and has taken the most significant actions to address and satisfy the needs of children and women in developing countries. Among its various projects, UNICEF called for investment in family-friendly policies that support early childhood development including paid paternity and maternity leave, free pre-primary education, and paid breastfeeding breaks.

UN Women

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

United States

The US is the only high-income country, as classified by the World Bank, that does not have paid parental leave. Currently, the US offers 12 weeks of unpaid leave for mothers, but this can prove to be a problem for low-income new parents if a baby requires an extended hospital stay.

Timeline of events:

1992	The EU mandates a 14-week paid maternity leave
1993	Norway incentivizes father's quota
1998	The EU mandates a three-month parental leave
2000	The ILO introduces the Maternity Protection Convention
2017/18	On the 72nd UN General Assembly, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted a high-level with UN Women titles 'Parental Leave: A Key to Prosperity'

Previous attempts to solve the issue:

ILO Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183)

This convention is the most up-to-date international labour standard on maternity protection, although the earlier relevant instruments (the Maternity Protection Convention, 1919 (No. 3), and the Maternity Protection Convention (Revised), 1952 (No. 103)) are still in force for countries in certain countries. Convention No. 183 provides for 14 weeks of maternity benefit to women to whom the instrument applies. Women who are absent from work on maternity leave shall be entitled to a cash benefit which ensures that they can maintain themselves and their child in proper conditions of health and with a suitable standard of living and which shall be no less than two-thirds of her previous earnings or a comparable amount. The convention also requires ratifying states to take measures to ensure that a pregnant woman or nursing mother is not obliged to perform work which has been determined to be harmful to her health or that of her child, and provides for protection from discrimination based on maternity. The standard also prohibits employers to terminate the employment of a woman during pregnancy or absence on maternity leave, or during a period following her return to work, except on grounds unrelated to pregnancy, childbirth and its consequences, or nursing. Women returning to work must be returned to the same position or an equivalent position paid at the same rate. The convention also provides a woman the right to one or more daily breaks or a daily reduction of hours of work to breastfeed her child.



Parental Leave Equality Index

Through examination of leave policies in different countries, the Parental Leave Equality Index (PLEI) was created to predict the participation of each parent in raising their children based on their gender, and the existing policy regarding parental leave. This model shows that a policy that provides equal, non-transferable, and well-paid leave for each parent would best encourage men's and women's equal participation in childcare.

Father's Quota

Social norms have historically not included child care in the main responsibilities of fathers. However, in some states, especially Nordic countries male parental leave was introduced to transform the traditionally gendered father practices and to create a social morality in relation to partners and children. Firstly, Norway proposed a non-transferable leave to fathers, known as the father's quota, in order to help foster gender equity, both in the workplace and in the home, since it shortens leaves for mothers, increasing their job tenure and potentially their wage growth. It is also supported by psychological evidence on the role of a father in child development being very similar to that of a mother.

Possible solutions and approaches:

Maternity and parental leave and benefit policies are just one component in a set of public and workplace policies and supports that can help parents reconcile the competing claims of work and family life following the birth or adoption of a child. Similarly, there is a need for more research into workplace supports that may make returning to work less stressful and more family-friendly. Specific examples could include flexibility in workplace scheduling and gradual reintegration to work, the promotion of breastfeeding, incentivizing fathers to participate in childcare, and the provision of reliable, high-quality infant care. In addition, it is imperative that policies address the need to expand the availability and affordability of high-quality, affordable child care services (both centre- and home-based) so that parents have peace of mind when they return to work and children benefit from stimulating and sensitive non-parental caregiving arrangements. Governments should also ensure that parental leave policies treat all families equally, offering equitable parental leave time whether their children are adopted, born through surrogacy, or given birth by the staff member. The UN Globe stated, that "The guiding principles of a parental leave policy should be equality, fairness, and non-discrimination, and its focus should always be the best interests of the child". Policies should hence support the idea of an earner-carer society and ensure that a woman's economic activities do not pose risks to the health of the woman and her child, and to ensure that women's reproductive roles do not compromise the economic security of their households.



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Annex:

