

Parental Leaves: Influencing the Equilibrium of Work Life and Gender Expectations

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Abstract

Equality in caregiving is one of the precursors of gender equality, particularly in the workforce. With the emergence of gender equality movements, parental leave policies were developed influencing both households and workplaces. This paper examines the multifaceted issues of inequality in caregiving from limited access to parental leave, gender norms, and unconscious biases that perpetuate the burden of motherhood and hinder equal participation in the workplace. This cycle is exacerbated in developing countries facing economic crises where the absence of paternal leave further reinforces gender roles. COVID-19 further highlighted the influence of unequal caregiving and its contribution to the gender pay gap and underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. This paper explores the historical evolution, causes, and effects of inequalities in child-rearing while providing and assessing current policies' effectiveness and offering potential solutions to their identified gaps. This paper also addresses the problem of economic crises such as reduced funds, the reluctance of employers to grant leave, and impact on parents' mental health. Finally, achieving progress in this field requires challenging traditional gender norms and promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect for all families.

Introduction

Ensuring equality in caregiving is a vital component of gender equality, paving the way towards progress, especially in the workplace. This is partly due to the common practice of having children during the most pivotal career stages. As gender equality gained momentum in the twentieth century, parental leave emerged impacting individuals both in the workplace and within their households (Earle et al., 2023). The United Kingdom pioneered parental leave through the Employment Protection Act, by effectively introducing the first paid maternal leave in 1911 (Bhandari, 2023).

Maternity leave is one of three types of child-related leaves, which are related by concept but differ by time and cause. The maternity leave is exclusive to employees

who have specifically undergone labor and given birth. This leave is usually shorter than the rest and is closer to a sick leave that entails the health concerns post-birth rather than child-rearing purposes. In other words, it is allocated during the post-delivery period, and sometimes following miscarriages, to allow the child-birthing parent to recover physically from the strenuous strain of pregnancy or delivery. On the other hand, lies the paternity leave given to the non-birthing parent for child rearing and to allow parent-child bonding time. Lastly, parental leave is a broader term that can encompass both leaves, though it is generally gender-neutral for any parent birthing, non-birthing, and adoptive to spend time with their children.

Table 1: Parental Leaves Comparative Table

	Maternity	Paternity	Parental
Eligibility	Birthing parent	Non-birthing parent	Both
Duration	Usually shorter		
Purpose	Physical recovery	Child bonding	Child bonding

This paper examines the effect of inequality in caregiving arising from a multifactorial and deeply rooted issue beginning from access to parental leave, societal norms, and cultural beliefs, all of which perpetuate the burden of caregiving on mothers, hindering their equal participation in the workforce. This vicious cycle is especially dire in developing countries in economic crisis such as Lebanon, where the exclusivity of maternal leave and the absence of any form of paternal leave reinforce the gender roles of women in child rearing and men as breadwinners. This is not only a violation of human rights but also maintains the gender pay gap and underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Kleven et al., 2019). This also forces a damaging dynamic on families, stripping them of their choice to divide their responsibilities as they see fit, which can reflect on the well-being of the family and the development of their children (Heymann et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the impact of unequal caregiving responsibilities on women's careers. Many were forced to leave their jobs due to increased caregiving needs during lockdowns and school closures. This drove the issue toward the public lens and called for policy reforms to address this inequality (Power, 2020). Stakeholders such as businesses, governments, and religious institutions might have conflicting interests and approach this problem by prioritizing economic efficiency, gender equality, or traditional gender roles. Governments and policymakers usually prioritize economic growth and productivity. Hence, their policies might be influenced by employers, budget limitations, and a productive workforce (Addati et al., 2014).

Additionally, businesses also focus on minimizing cost, maintaining productivity, and focusing on a stable workforce. Some of them view parental leaves as costly or unproductive while others recognize their importance in retaining the employees and increasing productivity in the long run. In turn, religious institutions may look at the issue through traditional gender roles, maintaining family values that emphasize women's nurturing and caregiving roles to keep the cultural and religious norms. These institutions keep a conservative approach to preserve gender roles and societal norms

in fear of disrupting the balance of the system whereas more progressive ones have proposed more appropriate solutions toward achieving gender equality (Addati et al., 2014).

Methodology

This paper employs a literature review and content analysis of existing articles related to caregiving, parental leaves, and gender inequality in the workplace while searching for improvements and gaps in previous policies.

Literature Synthesis

This synthesis aims to explore the historical evolution, causes, and effects of inequality in caregiving and access to child-related leaves. It also aims to assess the effectiveness of current policies and identify their gaps while giving potential solutions to the issue at hand.

Historical Evolution

The roots of the issue can be traced back to gender and cultural norms and to the societal expectation of women assuming caregiving and domestic roles. While well-intentioned, the first maternal leave in 1911 further reinforced the traditional women's role (Bhandari, 2023). However, more women entered the workforce, creating the need for more equitable and inclusive policies. The introduction of parental leaves in 1973 thus also included the non-birthing parent, aiming to reduce the caregiving burden on the birthing parent. This reform allowed parents to better balance their personal life and professional life without the need to sacrifice one for the other. The trigger for this reform was a history teacher in the United States who was not given a non-paid leave to care for his 10-month-old child and was denied the appeal due to the leave being exclusive to female employees. After suing the district court and filing a complaint, the law was found to be discriminatory knowing that male employees cannot benefit from it. The pronoun "her" referring to the teacher in the section was then changed to include adoptive and non-birthing parents (Rothman, 2015). The European Union followed this course by implementing a paternal leave in 2010 that was a month long, thereafter increased to two months in 2019. Nowadays, most countries have types of parental leaves with variations in duration and wages determined by the laws in question (Parento, 2023).

Despite all these advancements, deeply ingrained workplace stigma and cultural attitudes still hinder the progress of these policies, especially in the face of inflexible workplaces, lack of paid leaves, and the fear of career penalties. It is worth noting that men also face similar problems associated with the stigma that men are the breadwinners and did not birth the child, hence their perceived role as needing to provide monetary rather than caregiving support. This also is based on the assumption that the leave is only for post-partum health recovery and to tend to the physical needs of the child, forgetting the psychological and parent-child bonding time necessary for healthy child development (Rossin-Slater, 2017).

Discrimination Causes

One major cause of discrimination towards employees who take parental leave is the absence of a clear line that defines the conditions of this leave due to the ambiguity

of the laws. For example, the federal court in New York stated in 2009 that occasional contact during leave is a professional courtesy and does not violate the family leave (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). This ruling does not define what this contact could be, and this can quickly escalate to frequent demands beyond simple tasks. Furthermore, businesses also lack policies establishing limits on the frequency of work contact or productivity expectations during the leave period. This problem leaves the new parents confused, prompting them to contact a colleague or a friend whose well-intentioned opinion might be influenced by underlying workplace and gender biases, hence perpetuating gender inequalities (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). This lack of formal guidelines makes the employees vulnerable to judgments on their work commitment based solely on their perceived accessibility and informal workplace norms and preconceptions rather than objective measures. It was found that mothers were significantly more likely to be perceived as less committed to their careers compared to fathers based on the time of the leave (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). These assumptions persisted despite the gender-neutral leave policies of the firm.

Another study invited 255 employees to evaluate workers on leave. The descriptions were the same except for the gender of the employee in the text which also indicated whether the parent remained available or unavailable during their leave (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). The man in the scenario was constantly penalized for not completing work-related responsibilities when compared to a working man with no leave. Nevertheless, the man who worked during his leave was not appreciated. However, women who did the same were highly appreciated compared to those who did not even take time off. Interestingly, women on leave were not penalized for being unavailable. This implies that working women on leave were perceived as going above and beyond when staying available, while men were practically expected to continue working during their leave period. Despite claiming no gender-based expectations, survey participants' responses implied an underlying unconscious bias against working fathers taking parental leave (Stamm & Tharp, 2023).

As discussed previously, the apparent behavioral differences between men and women in societies stem from the gendered distribution of societal roles. This stratification is a potential factor contributing to this gender inequality. This is otherwise known as the social role theory (Stamm & Tharp, 2023), indicating, notably, that this gender role even shows in the desire of men to be the primary financial provider of the family. On the other hand, both men and women showed an inclination towards equal parenting responsibilities with their partners.

On one hand, when considering unpaid leave options, a significant discrepancy between men and women was observed. Women tend to plan on taking longer leaves when offered 12 or 52 weeks compared to men (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). Both genders' answers aligned with the traditional gender norms when asked about the duration of the unpaid leave of their partners. On the other hand, when considering the 12-week paid option, the differences between genders persisted but decreased compared to the unpaid one. Nevertheless, when presented with 52 waged weeks, insignificant disparity was found in the planned duration, yet the expectations of each gender on the partner differed once again. While men planned to have longer leaves if paid, women were two times more inclined than men to take longer leaves if unpaid (Stamm & Tharp, 2023).

The well-intended parental leave aiming to favor gender equality might have backfired. Indeed, when men were asked about their plans during the leave, they allocated a great portion toward activities to enhance their resumes such as learning new skills and looking for better job and business opportunities (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). Interestingly, this plan was not limited to older men in the work culture acquired after years in the workplace; similar patterns emerged when university undergraduates were requested to envision and plan a theoretical leave (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). Consequently, men devote more time to career-linked endeavors, leaving women to focus more on childrearing during their leave, which increases the discrepancies in their respective resumes (Stamm & Tharp, 2023). Paradoxically, therefore, all the causes discussed suggest that implementing equal parental leave policies may not eliminate workplace gender disparities and could potentially introduce new challenges due to deeply ingrained societal expectations and normative gender roles.

Economic Crises and Parental Leaves

Economic crises can significantly exacerbate the challenges associated with parental leave policies in terms of implementation and discrimination. During times of financial strain, governments and businesses face constraints especially in terms of budget. This may lead to a reduction of funding allocated for parental leave programs. This might push employees to choose between their financial stability or caregiving responsibilities (Addati et al., 2014). This reluctance of employers to grant parental leave stems from fears of negatively impacting productivity. Ironically, this has quite the contrary effect and decreases employee morale, which impacts the long-term staff retention rates, costing the business more for hiring and training new employees (Parento, 2023). Furthermore, economic crises can lead to job insecurity and an increased competition for available jobs. This scenario might discourage employees from exercising their rights and taking parental leaves to avoid being perceived as less committed, especially in workplace cultures that prioritize productivity over work-life balance. Moreover, the unstable situation can have a detrimental impact on parents' mental health, hindering their ability to fully bond with and care for their newborns.

Policy Review and Suggestions

Business leaders understand the importance of family-oriented policies in attracting and retaining talent. Nearly 60% recognize their role in having a loyal and productive workforce. Such initiatives have shown a remarkable decline of 70% in employee turnover rates for employed mothers who were granted a compensated 12-week leave (Parento, 2023). The benefits even extended beyond mothers to include all employees who showed better commitment to the organization. This plays greatly in the success of the company, knowing that by preserving their trained workforce, they lower hiring and training costs.

In 2002, the California state pioneered a legislation for parental leave, which took effect in 2004. By 2018, the number of parents taking a minimum of six weeks leave rose from initially 45% to reach 80% (Sholar, 2016). In 2021, the scope was expanded to encompass family members serving abroad. Subsequently, New Jersey passed and implemented paid parental leave in 2008 and 2009, respectively, which benefited 85% of parents (Sholar, 2016). New York City now boasts one of the best parental leave programs of the country, offering employment protection and up to eight weeks of

paid benefits for new parents. Concerning Washington State, it enacted a paternity law in 2007 that did not take effect until 2020, providing a 12-week compensated absence for employees working a minimum of 820 hours annually or 16 hours weekly. It is important to have clear federal legislation and regulation that protect the rights of new parents due to the reluctance of many employers to give a leave in the absence of laws. However, these state-mandated programs are funded differently. Some of them are financed through contributions of both employers and employees into a dedicated fund which then compensates the workers during their leaves.

In Lebanon, the Labor Code underwent legislative revision in 1994 to include an obligatory seven-week maternity leave after childbirth, which was later extended in 2014 to 10 weeks (Tabbara, 2022). However, this duration is barely enough for the mothers to recover physically and definitely not enough to take care of their newborn(s), considering the lack of paternity leaves in Lebanon. Recalling her own experience, Lara Fayyad, a Lebanese mother, said that the duration of her leave was inadequate and forced her to return to work while her newborn was still breastfeeding and required the presence of his mother (Tabbara, 2022). Placing her infant in daycare in time of the pandemic was not a viable option. When Fayad's spouse was asked to assist, he was overwhelmed, citing his 8 to 6 work schedule that barely allowed bonding with his child; he also advocated for the implementation of paternity leave policies. Moreover, Lara had to take 15 weeks of unpaid leave to care for her child, whom she then enrolled at three months in daycare (Tabbara, 2022). As a potential solution, institutions should look into investing in a nursery for employees' children.

To mitigate the challenges mentioned, the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) collaborated in March 2021 with non-governmental organizations and some companies to revise parental policies and draft a proposal submitted to the Lebanese parliament. The draft consisted of implementing a 15-week maternal leave postpartum and a 10-day leave for the father. Concurrently, the university voluntarily implemented this draft in the hope of paving the way for future reforms.

The initial step on the way to resolving this issue would be to adopt the proposed legislation nationally. This action could serve as a blueprint for better initiatives. A committee focused on these policies must be established and tasked to collaborate with non-governmental organizations to study and devise a plan for an effective enactment of these leaves within the governmental bodies, then within private ones. The following step should include exploring various funding avenues for this program, ranging from international resources to local and nationwide fundraisers. After securing the financing resources, the focus must be shifted towards extending the maternal leave to 20 weeks and ensuring compliance across both the public and private sectors. The final step for the moment should aim to achieve a paternal leave consisting of a minimum of four weeks.

Moreover, educational, public awareness, and workplace policies can help alleviate the effect of the discriminatory gender roles that might hinder the effective implementation of parental leave. Educating individuals from an early age to avoid the unconscious bias passed down from generations is crucial. This can be achieved by incorporating

gender equality principles into schools' curricula, highlighting the importance of shared caregiving responsibilities between parents. It is also important to include mandatory courses or modules that focus on gender studies in general, with sections addressing the societal impact of unequal caregiving. To reach the broader public, nationwide awareness campaigns can be launched through various media channels in collaboration with religious institutions, non-governmental organizations, community leaders, and celebrities to challenge traditional gender roles and promote fair caregiving responsibility distribution.

More can also be done on the workplace level by mandating gender sensitivity and unconscious bias training for all employees, while also encouraging fathers to take parental leaves by offering additional leave days or flexible work arrangements. It is also crucial to implement clear policies concerning the conditions of the leaves to prevent discrimination against employees regardless of their gender. Another aspect to reassure new parents is to establish a committee to monitor the implementation of all policies ensuring compliance of all sectors. Finally, a mechanism for reporting and addressing discrimination against individuals should be publicly available.

Conclusion

Gender equality in caregiving responsibilities is a multifactorial challenge that needs a comprehensive approach that must include progressive parental leave policies. It is also essential to address the gender norms and unconscious bias that lead to discriminatory attitudes and perpetuate the burdens on mothers. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that parental leave policies are not only a matter of individual benefits but have a wider effect on society. Inaccessible parental leave during economic crisis can perpetuate gender inequalities. This is especially true due to the tendency of women having to bear the burden of caregiving responsibilities. This can negatively reflect and hinder their career advancement (Addati et al., 2014). Policymakers must recognize the broader impact of parental leave on gender equality and long-term economic productivity, hence prioritizing its preservation especially during economic hardships. This can include alternative funding mechanisms such as private-public partnerships. Furthermore, it is vital to strengthen and enforce legal protections against violations of these laws, including but not limited to discrimination for taking the leave and the education of parents about their rights to help alleviate the fear and hesitations of employees. It is important to understand that this is not only a matter of social justice but an economic problem. Supporting families in these periods contributes to a more productive society, better-equipped to bear economic hardship and emerge to the other side.

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