

Background

Some countries have passed legislation requiring certain employers to offer employees parental leave. For example, Canada requires that eligible employees are entitled to parental leave of 12 to 52 weeks without pay, including 35 weeks of employment insurance benefits.¹ In the US, the Family and Medical Leave Act entitles eligible employees to 12 weeks of leave without pay for family and medical reasons, including the birth of a child, care of a newborn child or child with a serious health condition, and adoption of a child.²

Description

In addition to maternity leave, some institutions offer parental leave for fathers (i.e., paternity leave), for employees whose spouses have given birth, or for parents of either sex who have newly adopted a child. At the institutions included in this review, paternity leave can range from two days at 100% salary (University of Ottawa³) to seven days at 100% salary (University of Western Cape⁴) to a combination of five days-two weeks at 100% salary (Dalhousie University,⁵ McMaster University,⁶ respectively), followed by ten weeks-fifteen weeks at 95% salary for eligible employees (Dalhousie University,⁵ McMaster University,⁶ respectively). Both Dalhousie University and McMaster University offer alternatives to the combined leave of seven weeks at 95% of salary (Dalhousie University⁵) or four weeks at 100% of salary (McMaster University⁶). At McMaster University, the same policies apply to new adoptive parents. The University of California requires academic staff who take parental leave to take leave without pay or use accrued vacation leave, for up to one year, and provides health insurance benefits for up to 12 work weeks for certain eligible employees.⁷

Under general parental leave at the University of Ottawa, employees receive 100% of salary for the first ten days and the difference between 95% of salary and maximum insurance benefits for up to 13 weeks between the first ten days and one year after the birth or adoption of a child.³ Any additional parental leave is without pay.

Dalhousie University also offers parental leave for graduate students, who may take leave for up to three academic terms over the course of one year.⁸ Students do not owe fees to the university during this period, and most scholarships do not provide financial support during parental leave.⁸ Medical residents who have been employed for at least one year are entitled to up to 35 weeks of parental leave without pay.⁹ Residents can apply for unemployment benefits that would be paid at 75% of salary during a two-week waiting period and 93% of salary thereafter for up to ten weeks.¹⁰ In fact, professional residents' associations in each Canadian province have agreements/contracts with the provincial government that outline residents' rights, including parental leave.¹¹

Results

Reviewers rated this practice as featuring the following gender transformative characteristics:

- Transform family, school, and/or work arrangements so that women are not economically or socially penalized/disadvantaged for caregiving (*critical criterion*)

- Change or attempt to change an imbalance of power or otherwise level the playing field (*critical criterion*)
- Challenge and change common discriminatory gender beliefs or norms (*critical criterion*)
- Introduce, make use of, or further the (existing) legal protections for women.

Parental leave is an important practice that can transform discriminatory policies and enable faculty and students to be both professionals/students and parents. This practice also recognizes that men as well as women have caregiving responsibilities and gives them the opportunity to fulfill them. However, little documentation was available on the effects of parental leave on employees' or students' professional or educational experiences at the institutions included in this review. In a survey of University of California-Berkeley faculty,¹² the University of California found that faculty awareness of unpaid parental leave policies increased from 41% of men and 45% of women in 2003 to 67% of men and 69% of women in 2009. Five percent of women faculty members with children born before 2003 took unpaid parental leave; no other cohort in the survey took this leave.

Summary conclusions

This practice has significant gender transformative potential, particularly for transforming work (and in some institutions, school) arrangements and challenging traditional gender norms that only women are responsible for caregiving. It is important to note that this practice can level the playing field not merely by being offered to both women and men, but by being used by both sexes.

Reference(s) and source(s)

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Other references used in this review

Telephone interview with Dr. Wanjiku Khamasi, Director of the Institute of Gender Equity Research and Development, Moi University, March 11, 2011.