

Background

Some countries have passed legislation requiring certain types of employers to offer employees maternity leave. For example, Canada requires that employees are entitled to maternity leave of 17 weeks without pay, including 15 weeks of employment insurance benefits following a 2-week waiting period.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

Many institutions (and their medical/health schools) provide maternity leave for their employees, though the features vary widely. Dalhousie University, McMaster University, and the University of Ottawa all compensate eligible employees at 95%-100% of salary and some level of insurance benefits for at least part of the leave.^{3,4,5} Dalhousie University and the University of Ottawa offer additional leave beyond the minimum 17 weeks required by law, sometimes depending on length of service, and University of Ottawa employees can apply for an unpaid leave of absence of up to two years.⁵ By contrast, the University of California allows all academic employees to at least 6 weeks of maternity leave (either continuous or intermittent), regardless of length of service. However, pay status during maternity leave varies according to the employee's position and length of service.⁶ Maternity leave varies even within an institution, as general staff members at Harvard University are entitled to up to 4 weeks of paid parental leave and extended parental leave of up to one year without pay⁷ while postdoctoral fellows in the medical and dental schools can take 13 weeks of maternity leave and a combination of short-term disability, parental leave, and vacation leave.⁸ Female staff members of the University of Western Cape can receive five months of paid maternity leave.⁹

Dalhousie University and the University of California have some provisions for students as well. Medical residents at Dalhousie who have been employed for at least one year are entitled to up to 17 weeks of maternity leave with unemployment benefits that would pay 75% of salary during the first 2 weeks and 93% of salary thereafter for up to 15 weeks.¹⁰ Residents may also take 5 weeks of parental leave immediately following maternity leave. In fact, medical residents in Canada are covered under agreements between professional residents' associations in each province and the provincial government.¹¹

Other graduate students at Dalhousie may take pregnancy/parental leave for up to three academic terms over the course of one year.¹² Students do not owe fees to the university and in most cases do not receive financial support from scholarships during this period. Registered graduate students at University of California-San Francisco do continue to receive financial support for up to 6 weeks during maternity leave.¹³ When graduate students are funded by a source that does not provide funding during maternity leave, the graduate program is responsible for providing paid leave.

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.

This practice met all three critical criteria for the Pregnancy/Family Responsibilities section. By treating maternity like any other “disability,” this practice challenges discriminatory gender beliefs and levels the playing field. Although more information is needed on how this practice is structured for and affects students, many institutions offer pregnancy and/or maternity leave to faculty and staff. However, few evaluations of the practice were available, though a 2009 survey of University of California-Berkeley faculty found that awareness and use of maternity leave policies increased among men and women faculty from 2003 to 2009.¹⁴

Summary conclusions

Pregnancy/maternity leave is one of the most well-known existing strategies to help working mothers integrate their personal and professional lives. Even when offered without pay, the practice still legitimizes the ability of a woman to be both a worker and a mother and, when explicitly stipulated in the leave policy, will prevent demotion or dismissal based on pregnancy status. Though the structure of this leave varies by institution, incorporating pregnancy/maternity leave into legal structures is helpful to ensuring a minimum level. The reviewers also noted that while some examples of pregnancy/maternity leave for certain types of graduate students were available, this practice should be offered to all students.

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