

## CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

“With generous leave, women will just want to stay at home indefinitely.”



Studies have demonstrated that women who have access to paid leave are more likely to return to work afterwards. For example, the rate at which new mothers left Google fell by 50% after paid maternity leave was extended from 12 to 18 weeks.<sup>21</sup> Another study found that women who took advantage of their state’s paid family leave policy were not only more likely to be working in the year following their child’s birth, but that they were also 39% less likely to be

receiving public assistance.<sup>22</sup>

Women’s ability to take leave and return to their positions in the workforce – rather than having to exit in order to become a parent – lowers recruitment and training costs for employers and helps to contribute to women’s continued participation in the labour force. Further, contrary to stereotypes that portray new mothers in the workplace as distracted, less committed, or requiring inconvenient accommodations, evidence demonstrates that **motherhood is in fact a strength at work.** New mothers returning to work have been found to be more productive in less time than their male counterparts.<sup>23</sup> Mothers often give more committed “yes-es” and are adept at skills like time and people management, organization, and creative problem

solving (though this does not tend to translate into better pay).<sup>24</sup>

Of course, not all mothers are eager to go back to work after the birth of their child. Some may decide not to. But **policies that expand choices** – not narrow them – will ultimately benefit individuals, families, employers, and the economy at large.



“Motherhood is a personal choice. The State should not pay for it.”



Social supports like paid parental leave are **investments by the State in current and future generations.** Parental leave helps to ensure that all individuals have the ability to choose to be parents, if they wish, and to continue to work. Implementing policies that foster co-responsibility indicates recognition of parenthood as a societal concern, and of how supporting families with their care responsibilities expands choice for all individuals.

Further, maternity leave is not a luxury or a vacation for a new mother; **parental leave is a necessity to facilitate the recovery, care, bonding, and good health of parents and their children.** The State’s provision of parental leave means that it will be accessible for all individuals, rather than those working for specific companies that have voluntarily implemented such allowances, or those who can afford to take time off from work to have a family. Without this access, individuals (especially

women) may face financial strain that causes them to pursue less secure but more flexible work arrangements or to leave the workforce altogether. Parental leave policies therefore create **broader benefits for the economy** by retaining productive members of society in the workforce and contributing to poverty alleviation.

### “Fathers don’t need leave; they aren’t the ones who give birth or breastfeed.”

Birthing parents do have biological needs related to the physical recovery from pregnancy and delivery that necessitate post-partum leave. This leave should not be shortened to accommodate the introduction of paternity or parental leave. However, it should also not translate into women being the only parents charged with the care of infants, which is another key purpose of leave. This would deny care to children with two male parents.

All co-parents deserve adequate time and support to bond with their infants and **establish an active role in their care**. Children should also have a right of access to their parents and can benefit from their equal participation in childrearing. Evidence shows that taking paternity leave increases a father’s involvement in their children’s lives for years to come and benefits both infant and maternal health. Research also shows that the more leave fathers take, the more changes they undergo in the brain’s amygdala and other emotional-processing systems, making them better suited to parenting.<sup>25</sup>

The low take-up rates for paternity and parental leave among men do not mean that these provisions are not needed. It does indicate, however, a need to reconceptualize policies within specific cultural contexts in order to encourage their greater use. Gender norms related to caregiving and paid work can influence how parents divide their responsibilities and how this is perceived in society. Fathers can experience real penalties for taking leave, including **stigma and financial losses**. Similarly, mothers who return to paid employment shortly after giving birth can also deal with conflict or feelings of guilt. It is essential to dismantle these stereotypes so that in heterosexual couples, the mother is not default parent with the father seen as having a supporting role.

### “Our government cannot afford paid parental leave.”

Paid parental leave and other family-friendly policies are investments with widespread **benefits that far outweigh their associated costs**. Paid parental leave promotes women’s empowerment, early childhood development, and more equitable gender relations in households, and it helps to reduce the costly consequences for governments of gender inequality and poverty. Evidence further demonstrates that such policies drive economic growth. In the Nordic countries, for example, the introduction of policies like paid parental leave and the resulting increases in women’s employment and earnings have boosted growth in GDP per capita by between 10 and 20 percent.<sup>26</sup>

Companies also benefit from the provision of paid parental leave. Family-friendly policies support **productivity increases, reduced absenteeism, and greater business earnings**. Parental leave policies enable workers, especially mothers, to advance in their careers. They boost employee morale, performance, engagement,



and health. Such policies also make businesses more attractive to talented prospective employees, which in turn improves brand image, recruitment, and competitiveness.

During times of economic crisis, there is sometimes pressure on politicians to implement austerity measures that cut social programs. This, however, can exacerbate gender inequalities and reverse development gains. Introducing **countercyclical fiscal measures** instead – including increased public spending on social programs like paid parental leave – can help to lessen the impacts of recessions, stimulate growth, and support the workforce through challenging economic circumstances. Because women are more likely to direct their earnings towards children (e.g. investing in their health and education), maternity leave policies also have positive replicating effects.

**“Families are closer-knit in our country. Grandparents are happy to help with childrearing, which allows women to return to work.”**

**Across cultures, grandparents tend to be enthusiastic about participating in their grandchildren’s lives**, and in the region, grandparents do provide substantial childcare. This can provide substantial support for families and have a positive impact on women’s labour market retention. However, many families would be disadvantaged if counting on grandparents – or other relatives – to provide consistent childcare was taken for granted as an alternative to implementing paid parental leave or complementary care policies.



The use of different **informal familial childcare arrangements** is influenced by a combination of parental preferences and relationships, socio-cultural environments and traditions, and critically, the family’s economic status. Grandparental care arrangements are much more common in low-income families. If this support were unavailable or complicated by distance, health reasons, or other responsibilities of the grandparents (including jobs of their own), then these families would be left without a secure safety net.

A further consideration is whether all grandparents are currently involved in primary childcare because they wish to be, or out of necessity. If paid parental leave were a viable option, and could be followed by **high-quality, affordable childcare**, grandparents may prefer to take on fewer childrearing responsibilities. Another important distinction is that it is usually maternal grandmothers, not grandfathers, who take on these duties. This could suggest that the care is undertaken as a continuation of norms that dictate care work as being women’s responsibility. Grandparents should be under no obligation to take on primary childcare, and an unwillingness to do so does not make them “bad” grandparents.

Finally, and most importantly, many parents are also enthusiastic about being with their new child in their early critical months. Paid parental leave facilitates parents’ ability to be present during this time.

### Law of note



In El Salvador, a program called “The Alliance for the Family” was adopted during the early 2000s recession. Its aim was to expand social protection from a gender equality perspective and to prevent the deterioration of living conditions for women and their families during and beyond the recession. Among its components was 100% payment of salaries during maternity leave for working mothers registered with the Salvadorian Social Security Institute.

Source: Espino, Alma, [“Gender Dimensions of the Global Economic and Financial Crisis in Central America and the Dominican Republic.”](#) *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 19 Issue 3, 2013.