

TWO IS NOT TOO MANY : A STUDY CONCERNING THE USE OF PARENTAL LEAVE

«I made full use of these precious moments to take care of my daughter and to strengthen our emotional bonds. You can't put a price tag on this!» (respondent)

Since the 1950s, the participation of women in the job market has more than doubled. This influx of women into the public domain has not, however, resulted in a corresponding increase in the participation by men in domestic and parental responsibilities. In practice, the consequences for women are a double workload, inferior salaries and primary responsibility for the care of dependents.

If we sincerely want equality between men and women, we must ask ourselves the following question : how can men be encouraged to become more involved in the private domain?

Parental leave¹, available to fathers and mothers since 1990, could encourage changes in the traditional division of labour between the sexes by convincing fathers to take temporary leaves of absence from their jobs and look after their newborn children. Little is known, however, about how men and women in Quebec make use of parental leave. Who is taking advantage of it? What factors influence such a decision? What has the experience been like for participants? Have changes really occurred in the division of labour? What are the obstacles blocking fathers from making use of parental leave?

The Conseil du statut de la femme has tried to answer these questions by undertaking a study of couples in which one spouse took advantage of the 10 weeks of parental leave paid for by unemployment insurance. More specifically, we compared men who took advantage of parental leave with women who did the same, and men who took advantage of parental leave with men who did not.

Parental leave is almost always taken by women

Few men avail themselves of parental leave. This is the first of the study's observations; only 4.2 % of all leave beneficiaries are men. As a general rule, men take less than 10 weeks (they represent only 2.5 % of those who make use of the full 10 weeks). And 70 % of men take the leave when their spouse is not eligible, leading one to suspect that had their partners been eligible, the women would have replaced them most of the time. In contrast, only 28 % of women taking paid parental leave have ineligible spouses.

During parental leave, most men do not stay home alone with the baby. In 60 % of all cases, their partners are also present. It can be assumed that fathers take parental leave primarily to support their partners.

«I think [the leave] is necessary so that I can help around the house, and so my wife can take the time to heal after the birth and breastfeed, and also take time with the baby and our other children.» (respondent)

Use of leave as an indicator of change in traditional male-female roles

Men who take parental leave do not seem, as one might expect, to experience a reversal of sex roles whereby they become principal caregivers while their spouses return to work. Nevertheless, they do choose to stop work temporarily and immerse themselves in family life. This choice indicates an important change in men's traditional "provider" role. Who are these men? One might expect parental leave beneficiaries to be affluent professionals, liberated types from an elite cultural and economic background.

This is not the case. Compared with those who do not take parental leave, men taking leave tend not to

work in management or professional capacities. Their income level is relatively lower and they have fewer years of education.

As for general attitudes to gender roles, the study shows that with the exception of men who take parental leave and remain at home alone with their infants, men who take parental leave are not more feminist in outlook than those who do not take it.

The behavior of the two groups of men does, however, differ. Even if men taking leave do fewer domestic and parental tasks than women, they do more than men who do not take parental leave. For instance, when the two parents are at home together, 54 % of women on leave make most of the meals as opposed to 18 % of men on leave and 10 % of men who do not take leave. With regards to doing laundry, the ratios are 61 % for women on leave, 16 % for men on leave and 4 % for men who do not take leave.

«I support and encourage this type of program which puts men and women on an equal footing when it comes to family chores.» (respondent)

Baby boys : daddy takes leave

Babies on the breast : mummy takes leave

In contrast with women, more men tend to take leave when the sex of the infant is masculine (58 % versus 49 %). On the other hand, maternal breastfeeding is less common when men take parental leave : 53 % of babies are breastfed when the father takes parental leave, whereas 66 % are breastfed when the mother is on leave.

A positive experience

Negative feelings of isolation, fatigue or work-related boredom are rarely experienced by beneficiaries of the parental leave program. Fewer than 10 % of respondents admitted experiencing one or another of these feelings. Men are less likely than women to experience isolation. This difference is partly due to the fact that men are seldom alone in the home while on leave. Women experience slightly more work-related boredom than men, which might be explained

by their having 15 weeks of maternity leave already behind them when they begin parental leave.

Moreover, over half of men on leave (52 %), as opposed to just over a third of women on leave (37 %), experience stress related to caring for the baby while alone in the home.

It is also significant that before taking their leave, more men than women plan to work on a personal project at home (18 % versus 8 %). This being said, men and women alike devote their time while on parental leave to taking care of their children.

On the whole, the men and women in our study who took advantage of parental leave were very satisfied with the experience. Women were more enthusiastic than men; 93 % of them said they would certainly take such a leave again if it were offered, as opposed to 67 % of the men.

Under-use of the parental leave program by men may be explained, in part, by women's enthusiastic appreciation of it. Women may want to keep this leave, which many feel is too short as it is, for themselves. A mother's attitude wields great influence over her partner's use of parental leave. Our findings show that positive attitudes in women towards their partners using parental leave encourage men to take the leave.

We do not mean to suggest that women exercise a power so great that they monopolize parental leave and prevent fathers from participating. Over 70 % of eligible men who opt not to take parental leave state that their own preference that the mother of their child take the leave plays a significant or very important role in their decision regarding parental leave.

In conclusion, it seems that women want to take parental leave and men prefer not to.

Obstacles to the use of parental leave by men

It might seem logical that unmarried fathers would be more willing than married men to experiment with non-traditional behavior, and thus to try parental leave. This has been shown to be the case in other

countries. It is not the case in Quebec. Marital status does not affect a man's decision to take parental leave.

Furthermore, the fact that a pregnancy is unplanned does not discourage men from using the leave program. Men participate in parental leave to the same degree regardless of whether or not the pregnancy was planned.

A large proportion (61 %) of men who do not take parental leave observe that the health needs of their spouses influence their decision to let their spouses take the leave. As maternity leave is relatively short, it can be insufficient for a woman's post-natal recuperation. In certain instances, parental leave seems to be a means to take care of the mother's health needs. These needs can be regarded as an obstacle to men's use of parental leave.

The same can be said of breastfeeding. When infants are breastfed, men tend not to take parental leave. If leaves were longer, breastfeeding -- which health-care workers highly recommend -- would not block the use of parental leaves by men.

Certain preconceptions still exist which hinder men from taking parental leave. Some people invoke the superior competence of mothers as grounds for letting women enjoy parental leave. No respondent in this study used a similar argument in favor of fathers taking parental leave.

Is economics a determining factor?

«One income cut by nearly 50 %, with a baby on top of it all -- it's not easy!» (respondent)

About seven out of 10 men regard parental benefits as insufficient. Nevertheless, espousers of this view are not more numerous among non-users of the leave program. In other words, judging the benefits insufficient does not necessarily influence a man's decision not to take parental leave.

Economic factors hindering men from taking parental leave do exist. A desire to minimize financial losses is an important factor for 42 % of men who decide to let their spouses make use of parental leave. Economic losses are usually smaller for couples when women take parental leave instead of men. This is

due to the fact that benefits are usually 55 % or 60 % of the salary and are subject to a predetermined ceiling. In addition, a two-week waiting period is imposed on men opting for leave and, in general, women earn less than men in our society.

Obstacles in the workplace

Research shows that parental leave is not used by men as a means for taking temporary leave of a dissatisfying job. Men who take parental leave are as satisfied with their jobs as those who do not take leave (respectively 83 % and 86 %).

And in contrast to Sweden, where men working in jobs in which women predominate tend to take more parental leaves, in Quebec this is not the case.

The workplace does, however, set up obstacles for men wanting to take parental leave. First of all, if a man works many hours a week (45 or more), he is less likely to take parental leave than if he works a moderate number of hours (36 to 44). Are the economic losses for men who routinely work overtime too great for them to leave work temporarily? Or perhaps they see their roles as men and fathers primarily in terms of "the provider," and thus leave childcare responsibilities to their partners.

Another obstacle in the workplace is non-unionization. Men who do not take parental leave are less frequently unionized (43 % were unionized) than those to take leave (61 %). The rate of unionization does not, however, account for everything. Women who take parental leave show unionization rates similar to those of men who opt not to take leave. The sense of being formally protected by a union might be more important for men than for women when it comes to taking parental leave. Men might feel that making use of such a leave is less acceptable.

The attitudes of a man's superiors in the workplace can be very influential with regards to taking parental leave. Men who do not take leave are far more likely to perceive a negative attitude in their superiors than men who do take leave (46 % versus 19 %). Colleagues' attitudes have a similar effect, but to a lesser degree.

It is significant that the attitudes of superiors and colleagues is less positive towards men than towards women making use of parental leave, even though many women feel pressured about their decision.

«The employer sets it up so that women professionals feel guilty for having a child... I'm expecting another child and they're letting me know that I may be on my way out the door.»
(respondent)

Men who believe that their leaves will result in more work for their colleagues are less inclined to impose this burden. According to 6 % of men who take parental leave, their absences result in a significant overload for their colleagues (32 % of men who do not take leave also hypothesize colleague overload). It is often difficult enough for men to adopt behavior patterns like parental leave that diverge from the masculine norm. If the new behavior also creates surplus work for their colleagues (thereby eliciting resentment), it might be easier to let women take the leave.

Obviously, it is easier for people to adopt non-traditional modes of behavior when others have tried it before them. According to our findings, men who take parental leave have had the advantage of a model in the workplace more often than those who do not take leave (42 % versus 21 %).

«Men who want to take parental leave but fear doing so will harm their careers should be able to talk to men who have father the leave and didn't see any impact on their career. I was scared, without reason. I was the first man to ever take parental leave at my company. And I don't think I'll be the last!» (respondent)

Negative attitudes among family and friends

Outside the workplace, friends and family can pressure men in subtle and not-so-subtle ways and discourage them from taking parental leave. On the other hand, approval and support from intimates can make it easier for men to take parental leave. We mentioned above the link between a woman's attitude and her partner's inclination to take temporary leave. Our findings show that the attitudes of a man's mother, father and friends influence whether or not he will take parental leave. While men encountering

blatantly negative attitudes among their intimates remain a small minority, those who take parental leave are more likely to have noticed positive attitudes in their friends (55 % versus 26 % for men who do not take leave), their fathers (50 % versus 22 %) and their mothers (57 % versus 27 %).

Inadequate information for men

Another obstacle hindering men from taking parental leave is information. Men who take advantage of the program are less likely than women to have heard about it through formal sources like the media, documentation or clerks at unemployment insurance offices (19 % versus 33 %). Formal information sources are important in encouraging men to use the program.

Avenues for action

«(Male) company directors should be forced to take this kind of leave. Maybe then they'd have more respect for stay-at-home mothers and for fathers who put their families first!»
(respondent)

Even if the current use of parental leave by men does not actually suggest a radical change of attitudes and behaviors involving sex roles, it shows a certain shift in the direction of greater equality between men and women. For women and men, parental leave is also an important means of reconciling work and family life when a new child is brought into the home. Parental leave must be maintained and improved.

Benefits are considered insufficient by the vast majority of respondents in this study, as is the length of the leave paid for by unemployment insurance. Increasing rates and extending the leave would offer more support to new parents and could encourage more men to take advantage of parental leave. We should also reserve part of the leave specifically for fathers, to counter their under-use of the program.

Information for the general public, and for men in particular, also needs to be improved. The media and the government ministry responsible for parental allocations (at the moment, Human Resources Development Canada) should work more actively to sensitize men to the possibility of taking parental leave, and to its advantages. Prenatal courses should

also serve as information sources for men. These courses are one of the only means of reaching prospective fathers collectively. Men's friends and families should also be targeted. We have seen to what point the attitudes of spouses and other intimates can influence men regarding parental leave.

The workplace should be the focus of special attention. Objective conditions and attitudes found there can be formidable obstacles for men eligible for parental leave. Limiting overtime, paying employees a compensatory fee above and beyond amounts received from the government (until a universal increase in benefits occurs), replacing employees on leave, strict application of the law to protect those who take parental leave, and sensitization programs for employers and employees alike are all means of encouraging men to take parental leave.

Conclusion

This study of parental leave sheds some light on the use of parental leave and factors influencing it. We have not examined the long-term consequences of parental leave on tasks performed by couples, on father-child relations or on the remunerated work of either women or men. Certain researchers (mostly European) have documented positive effects of leave in each of these areas.

For its part, the Conseil du statut de la femme feels that parental leave, when taken by fathers, can contribute to the promotion of equality in relations between the sexes. Women, men, children and society as a whole will eventually feel the benefits of more equitably shared parenting.

¹ Parental leave : Since 1990, a leave of 10 weeks which may be shared between the father and mother has been added to maternity leave. Throughout this 10-week parental leave, an allowance is paid equivalent to UIC benefits for which the individuals opting to remain at home to look after their baby would be eligible.

Methodology

This study was undertaken by mailed questionnaire with a sample of 416 women and 315 men who, in statistical terms, adequately represent the 40 300 Quebec women and 1 024 Quebec men receiving parental benefits between June 1993 and June 1994. The margin of error for the sample is less than 5 % at a 95 % reliability level. Domestic partners eligible for parental leave were also solicited. Three hundred and thirty-two answered the questionnaire. Bi- and multi-variable analysis techniques (logistical regression) were used.

Publication

On n'est pas trop de deux : étude sur l'utilisation du congé parental, research paper by the du Conseil du statut de la femme, research and writing : Marie Moisan, septembre 1995, 149 p.

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