

# It's about time we give parental leave a much-needed facelift <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

If children truly matter, and if Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is to follow through on his claims to be a feminist, we know he will do the right thing. Namely, lower eligibility criteria for maternity- and parental-leave benefits to match Quebec at 186 hours. Children need parents with income security. The federal government's proposed policy changes will not provide this basic security. It will have zero benefit for more than one-third of Canadian children.

Making maternity leave available earlier in pregnancy is a good step. It makes the system fairer to women and is in the best interests of the child. This kind of thinking needs to extend to eligibility criteria, with 600 hours in the previous 52 weeks standing as the major barrier to access. An average of 25 per cent of mothers paid into employment insurance (EI) during pregnancy but didn't have enough hours. Other mothers pay into EI for the rest of their lives but didn't make the cut when it mattered.

We know from our research — published with Sophie Mathieu in the September issue of the *Journal of Industrial Relations* — comparing EI to the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, that Quebec's coverage rates are far better. Of all mothers off-reserve, 64 per cent receive benefits under EI across nine provinces, compared to 89 per cent in Quebec. This means under EI, 36 per cent of mothers don't qualify, compared with only 11 per cent in Quebec.

Mothers in lower-income families are most excluded, with 56 per cent left out under EI, compared with 15 per cent in Quebec. The socio-economic difference is stark under EI with 30 per cent more mothers in higher-earning families receiving benefits compared to lower-earning families. In Quebec, this difference is only 10 per cent. Quebec improved take-up among families earning less than \$30,000/year by 21 percentage points over six years, from 64 per cent in 2007 to 85 per cent in 2013.

The implication is that when mothers are excluded, newborn infants are excluded.

Quebec solved this problem by lowering eligibility criteria, including self-employed workers and changing the funding model. The federal government should follow suit. If this government cannot stand up to business pressure to reduce EI premiums for the sake of Canadian children, then parcel out special benefits and supplement these benefits through investment income (like Quebec) or general revenue (like most countries).

The current eligibility criteria for maternity and/or parental leave are indefensible. At present, a parent needs 600 hours in the previous 52 weeks. This means 17 weeks or four months and a week of full-time work. Compare this to \$2,000, which is 186 hours at minimum wage (\$10.75) required in Quebec, and 480 hours required in some regions for regular EI. Looking further abroad we know of at least five countries (Finland, Spain, Sweden, Austria, Norway) where zero hours of paid work are required and where leave benefits are considered a universal right.

Trudeau lowered eligibility for EI benefits this year for new entrants and re-entrants to the workforce, from 910 to 480-700 hours. Lowering eligibility is proposed for the compassionate care benefit and the parents of critically ill children benefit. There is ample international evidence and strong social equity rationales for lowering eligibility criteria for maternity and parental benefits: child development; reductions in child poverty; income security at birth/adoption; and best practice internationally, meeting International Labour Organization standards. The World Health Organization recommendation of six months of exclusive breastfeeding is undermined by lack of access to leave. Finally, children benefit in the long run but lose out at birth when born while parents earn diplomas and degrees. Women's fertile years overlap directly with years in post-secondary education.

Public consultations launched Oct. 6 are inadequate and will not achieve "real change." The consultation discussion paper offers no evidence for the policy changes proposed. Extending duration or allowing non-contiguous periods simply repeat history. In 2001, then-prime minister Jean Chrétien did the same thing: extending duration, improving benefits for eligible parents, while ignoring the significant proportion of parents, and therefore children, excluded. In both instances, Liberal governments avoid fixing — and through this, worsen — a child-care-spaces problem by offering parental leave instead.

What is currently on the table for revising parental leave is a poorly crafted policy for children, for women, for indigenous peoples, for

lower-earning working families, for students, single parents and the self-employed. It is out of step with international best practices and will only benefit those who do not need help: higher earners in standard employment and employers, and it will help men's careers. It will exacerbate the rich-poor gap in parental leave, as well as the gender wage gap. We will all be paying for it.

Parents' ability to balance work and their caregiving responsibilities will improve when they have access to leave benefits. Canadians deserve the now decade-old Quebec model and more. Exclusion is the most egregious failing of the system; lowering eligibility criteria is the first and most important step to improving it.

The federal government, led by our feminist prime minister, from Quebec, can walk the talk by lowering eligibility criteria to 186 hours. Channel benefits to all children and children who need it the most.

We call on Canadians to join us in calling for lowering eligibility criteria as the No. 1 priority and a first step in the right direction. All Canadian children have an equal right to be cared for, especially as newborn infants.

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