

Longer maternity leave? Thanks, but no thanks ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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As a professional career woman with a passion for gender equity – as well as a mother of a two-year-old with another on the way – I'm probably the ideal target audience for the federal government's recent decision to lengthen parental leave.

And while I appreciate Ottawa's attention – thanks, but no thanks. It may have been intended as "woman-friendly," but this policy is a bad deal for gender equality.

Last month's budget made good on the Liberal government's election promise to add an extra six months to parental leave benefits. Right now, a new mother is entitled to 15 weeks of maternity benefits plus another 35 weeks of parental leave that can be shared with fathers. During these 12 months, EI benefits are paid out at 55 per cent of the maximum income of \$51,300. The new plan will offer the opportunity to stretch that time off to 18 months, but with a lower payout rate of 33 per cent.

On the math alone, 18 months at 33 per cent isn't quite as good as 12 months at 55 per cent. So this change won't make financial sense for most families. But for mothers tempted by the promise of some extra time off at home with their newborn, it's something of a poisoned chalice. (Or spoiled baby bottle, if you prefer.)

Let's start by observing that the overwhelming majority of parents who take advantage of the 18 months will be mothers. Outside of Quebec, fewer than 10 per cent of Canadian fathers currently take any parental leave at all; there's no reason to expect this trend to reverse itself just because an extra six months are available. This dominance of women on parental leave puts them at a disadvantage in two ways.

First, the longer a new mother is away from paid work, the less likely they are to advance through promotion or pay raises once they return – and more likely to be fired or downsized. My own research, for example, reveals that women who take the standard 12-month maternity leave, when compared with women who take much shorter leaves, are less likely to advance to management positions and are perceived to be less committed to their jobs. Given a severe under-representation of women in top management positions (only 16 per cent of board seats in Corporate Canada are held by women), this is troubling. While some women may welcome the extra time at home, they are overlooking the long-term effects this can have on their careers.

Second, the possibility female employees may choose the full 18 months will exacerbate existing prejudices and stereotypes among some employers. Female job applicants of child-bearing age will soon be considered to pose an even greater risk of leaving for a lengthy period of time, when compared with their male counterparts. (And to be honest, there is some validity to this burden – especially for small employers who must hire replacement workers and pay benefits for the year-and-a-half.)

Combine these two factors, and the disadvantages already faced by women in the workplace can only get worse. While it may have been designed to improve gender equality, longer parental leave will ironically make it even harder for women to get ahead. It can also be expected to widen the gender wage gap.

What should we do? There's nothing inherently wrong with longer parental leave in theory, so we don't need to scrap the whole idea. But we need to make sure the costs and benefits are shared equally between the sexes.

One solution is to reserve some portion of the 18 months for the exclusive use of fathers. Quebec's unique parental insurance program currently offers a dad-only allotment of five weeks of paid parental leave, and at a favourable income replacement rate of 70 per cent. This no doubt explains why a stunning 78 per cent of Quebec fathers opt to take at least some of their paternity leave. It's a far cry from the sub-10-per-cent rate in the rest of the country. Last year, Sweden added an extra month to its already substantial fathers-only leave program; as a result, Swedish dads are now taking a quarter of all shared parental leave time. This is a big deal.

If Canadian fathers can be convinced to take on a greater portion of parental leave, the workplace disadvantages faced by Canadian mothers will be reduced in lockstep. Employers would no longer have a systemic preference for male over female candidates based on the

likelihood of them disappearing for a year-and-a-half after childbirth. If both sexes are equally likely to take time off post-pregnancy, there's no reason to discriminate on any grounds. And this should ease gender conflict over promotion, pay and career – eventually leading to a better representation of women in upper management.

Rather than just making parental leave longer, let's make it better – for everyone.

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