

Extending maternity leave won't help women returning to work^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canada will, over the next few years, seek to adopt an 18-month parental leave, an increase of six months. It will come with many potential benefits, such as a longer bonding time for the child and parent (usually the mother), and allowing more time for parents to look for child care. It might even entice more parents to split the time off between them. But there is no extra money – the same amount is just stretched out longer.

On the surface, the extended leave is supposed to help all parents who will be eligible to receive these benefits. One key group it misses, however, are those parents – mainly women – who want to go back to work sooner rather than later. The 18-month option does not help women at all when it comes to returning to work. Rather, it makes current problems worse for them.

A key example is job protection. Sure, you can not take away a woman's job because she is pregnant or on maternity leave. But it can legally be taken away for no reason, so long as a severance amount is awarded. Time and time again, women who have been away for a year (not to mention daring to be away for 18 months), come back to hear that they no longer have a future at the company, or there have been organizational changes and their role is no longer needed. Some of these reasons are legitimate, but in too many cases, it is simply because she checked out for a year (with the possibility of more time off coming if another kid is in the works).

To compound the problem, when she is laid off upon her return to work, there is no employment insurance because she has used it up during her maternity leave.

If she comes back to a job, she many times is faced with the perception that she is not as committed as before, or would prefer lighter roles and projects, or that she will be taking off as soon as a call comes in that the baby is under the weather. She is marginalized, with stereotypical opinions formed well before she comes back after 12 months. In 2013, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report on Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) that offer extended leave to parents. The report concluded that studies suggested women who take longer leaves tend to get lower wages upon their return.

These are two of many issues women face when they return to work, often eager and excited to be back. Many women value their careers. They put in blood, sweat and tears to get to where they are. They make a significant contribution to the work force, and yet when it comes to helping families and women on maternity leave, the only commitment the government is making to them is to help them stay home longer.

The time has come to help women successfully return to the workplace, and here are a few ideas:

First and foremost, change the thinking that parental leave is a problem. This should apply first in terms of finding an interim replacement for a woman while she is away, and second when she returns to work in terms of reintegrating her into a potentially changed company. Employers should view parenthood is a positive life experience that can deepen an employee's commitment to a company that treats them fairly and with empathy (including men who equally want to share the early parenting experience). Some companies have HR departments that embrace this thinking, but too many need to change their internal culture on this point. For starters, simply saying to the employee, "Congratulations! Let's talk and work out the details," can do a world of good in bridging goodwill and co-operation before she leaves, and sets a positive foundation once she returns.

In addition, some government assistance needs to be in place, especially for small businesses that can suffer financial losses when a parental leave takes place. This is especially true for people who work in sales with commission roles, as these roles are nearly impossible to fill and get the full financial benefit during the leave period because it can often take a year just to begin to nurture a client base.

Second, greater safeguards need to be in place to protect women from losing their jobs once they return to work. It is discriminatory to lay off a woman because she took parental leave, so employers will give a different, vague reason for the layoff, never disclosing the real cause. This needs to stop.

But, if indeed her role has been eliminated (legitimate changes do happen), a woman returning to work should be eligible for separate employment insurance benefits. The government needs to stop lumping all the benefits into a single draw per 600 insurable hours.

Parental leave is different than compassionate care leave, which is entirely different than job loss. Many people do not work for companies that can afford to offer generous severance packages, so employment insurance benefits are critical.

Third, helping women means incenting them to successfully return to work, if they choose. This could mean putting measures in place, such as education and awareness on the part of the employer, so they are not marginalized and set back in their career after they take time off to care for an infant. Or, making daycare options more accessible in terms of cost and availability. Especially with issues of work force aging and the desperate need for innovative talent in so many segments, it is in the interests both of government and industry to jointly ensure women have a viable pathway to resume the careers that often are of significant personal importance to them, and to which they offer great potential contributions.

I took a 12-month leave and a six-month leave when I had my kids. I returned to work because I care deeply about my career, and I'm similar to a significant percentage of women who don't want to see a binary choice between parenthood and their professional careers. More importantly, however, I am a better friend, partner, daughter, sister, colleague, mother and wife because I work.

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