

Longer parental leave could worsen gender equality, says UBC prof^[1]

Paul Kershaw explains how extending parental leave from 12 to 18 months without increasing benefits could leave women farther behind

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The way a change to parental leave has been designed by the federal government could further entrench the already wide gap between what men and women earn and the kinds of jobs they hold, a UBC professor is warning.

“When we’re talking about parental leave and effectively lengthening parental leave from 12 to 18 months, from the viewpoint of gender equality — which this federal government talks a lot about — is really risky,” said Paul Kershaw, a professor at the University of British Columbia’s School of Population and Public Health.

Kershaw is also the founder of Generation Squeeze, a lobby group for people in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Generation Squeeze has for many years proposed extending parental leave to 18 months, but with an important addition: the group’s policy included doubling the employment insurance benefits new parents are entitled to.

That would mean fathers, who tend to be the higher-earning partner, would be more likely to take leave, Kershaw said.

In contrast, the new federal policy requires families who want to take 18 months to do so on the same 12 months-worth of employment insurance benefits. That’s led some critics to point out the change will likely most benefit Canadian parents who already have high incomes. (The policy comes into effect on Dec. 3 and will apply to federally-regulated workplaces, but provinces will have to pass their own legislation.)

With women already earning just \$0.87 to every \$1 earned by men, with much of that gap attributed to women spending time out of the workforce to raise children, Kershaw said the policy as it stands could reinforce gender imbalance in some professions.

Studies show that longer parental leave, especially for longer than one year, “corresponds with reinforcing occupational segregation and ultimately a gender earnings gap for women,” Kershaw said.

Along with lengthening parental leave and increasing benefits, Generation Squeeze also recommended a \$10 a day childcare program and incentives to encourage employers to offer more flexible work schedules.

Kershaw acknowledged that extending leave to 18 months could ease the childcare squeeze many families experience, because there are few childcare spaces for children under 18 months and the cost is higher. In fact, women who live in Canada’s most expensive cities for childcare are less likely to work, according to Statistics Canada.

Normalizing fathers’ decision to take paternity leave would also be an important step forward for Canadian society, Kershaw said, just as workplaces adapted to women taking one-year maternity leaves.

“All the data shows that getting dads involved early on with their infants, it’s good for kids, it’s good for spousal relationships and it’s good for gender equality,” he said.

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