

# Giving fathers time off still isn't enough to end the motherhood penalty <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Purtill, Corinne & Kopf, Dan

**Source:** Quartz

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 28 Jan 2018

## AVAILABILITY

[Read online](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Advocates of paid parental leave maintain that giving both mothers and fathers the opportunity to care for a child early in life ensures fair distribution of caregiving responsibilities later on—and a better shot for both men and women at maintaining their earning power.

But new research that looks at earning patterns in Denmark reveals a disheartening trend: even in a country with generous paid leave available to both men and women and subsidized childcare, mothers' wages are still dramatically lower than those of women who don't have children, while fathers' pay is essentially unaffected.

To only a slightly smaller degree than their US counterparts, Danish women are also hit with the "motherhood penalty"—the persistent chasm between men's and women's wages that opens once a woman has a child. The reasons why show the complicated problems underlying the gender pay gap, a phenomenon fueled both by the availability of parent-friendly policies and by deeply ingrained beliefs about parents' roles.

[Graph indicating "Earning loss for Danish parents" shows women begin with comparable earnings to men, but experience a significant dip in those earnings upon having a child, from which the effects appear to endure. Graph can be viewed online].

Compared to the US, the only developed country on the planet that doesn't guarantee paid leave to new mothers, Denmark's parental leave policy is a dream. Denmark grants a family 52 weeks of paid leave upon the birth of a child. The mother is guaranteed 18 of those weeks, the father is entitled to two, and the remaining 32 can be divided between the parents as they wish. In practice, women end up taking 92.8% of that time, according to the OECD.

A new working paper (not yet peer reviewed) from the US National Bureau of Economic Research finds that first maternity leave marks the beginning of a noticeable and permanent decline in a woman's earning power and career power. Both men and women with children see a dip in their earnings compared to childless counterparts. But the decline for mothers is almost 20 percentage points larger than it is for fathers—a gap that increases with the number of children a family chooses to have.

[Graph online shows, "More children means less income for Danish mothers ten years later"].

Danish men take far less of the paternity leave available to them than their counterparts in other Scandinavian countries. A man who takes paid paternity leave is directly contributing to his female partner's later earnings. Quartz's Gwynn Guilford found that in Sweden, where a family loses some of their paid parental leave unless the father takes it, a woman's earnings rose 7% on average for every month of leave her husband took.

Sharing parental leave establishes a pattern of shared responsibility that continues throughout the child's life. A family that becomes used

to a mother doing the lion's share of the housework and childcare during an extended maternity leave can find it difficult to break those habits later.

The overwhelming likelihood that mothers take Denmark's shared leave is in part due to a vicious cycle of income inequality. Women typically earn less than men, and given that the leave is not fully paid for all 52 weeks, most couples opt for the lesser-paid partner to stay home with the child. The increased likelihood that a woman will take an extended leave in turn discourages employers from hiring women, which keeps women's wages lower than men's.

But even if the financial impact was equal, the social pressure to take that leave is not. In an in-depth look at Denmark's parental leave policies, the New Republic noted in 2015 that many women in Denmark are as reluctant to give up their leave to male partners as men are to take it.

"Mothers think it's a bad idea because they find that that's her privilege to stay home for the year," said Lise Johansen, an advisor on gender equality and family policies at the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, told the magazine. "And the [fathers'] employers think it's a really bad idea because they have these very small companies of carpenters or whatever, and if he's away for a month, how would they cover that?"

She continued: "What happens in Denmark is these paths of women and men separate once they have kids. And then you get this traditional—I wouldn't say as traditional as the US—but we tend to find these very traditional boxes when we become parents."

Those boxes begin to take shape far earlier than marriage or childbirth. The researchers looked at respondents' family histories and found that women opt for work-life arrangements similar to the ones their own mothers struck. The more hours a Danish woman's mother worked when she was growing up, the less her own wages declined after the birth of her children. (Her mother-in-law's work history had no effect on her earnings.)

"Women tend to adopt a balance of paid work and childcare that is correlated with the one they saw their mother strike when they were growing up," Henrik Kleven, a Princeton economist and the paper's lead author, told Quartz At Work.

Denmark has a higher share of mothers in the workforce than the US does. But those mothers also work more often in family friendly jobs and in part-time roles, and are less likely to become managers than men with children are. Their lower wages are the result of a series of career decisions that prioritize children's needs over their long-term earnings.

[Line graph compares the likelihood of males and females becoming managers. Women are slightly more likely to become managers than males prior to having their first child, at which point the line representing female trajectories flattens out, while male trajectories begin a positive slope. Available to view online].

Choosing a family-friendly career path is a noble goal for a parent of any gender. There are a multitude of valid reasons both financial and familial why one parent might elect to take on the bulk of parental leave. Families thrive when they have the freedom to choose the solution that works best for them, which is part of the appeal of shareable leave.

But if partners aren't conscious of why they are apportioning their work-life arrangements as they do, then that choice isn't really a choice. The hectic pace of life as a working parent makes it easy to fall into pattern based on what needs to be done in the moment, without conscious consideration of the long-term effects—or of the circumstances that makes such decisions necessary. Is a woman cutting back on her hours because she prefers to go part time, or because the division of domestic labor established during maternity leave isn't manageable with a full-time job? Do women decline management opportunities because they're not interested, or because a partner's inflexible schedule and higher wages make any compromise impossible?

A satisfying and sustainable division of family labor starts with these questions. A family is shaped in many ways by the generations that came before it. Creating a society that offers truly equal opportunity for mothers and fathers alike will likely take generations too.

**Related link:**

**Region:** [International](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** [maternity and parental leave](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

[paternity leave](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

[gender](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

[wages](#) <sup>[7]</sup>

[equity](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

[social policy](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

[data](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

---

**Source URL (modified on 25 Mar 2020):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/01/giving-fathers-time-still-isnt-enough-end-motherhood-penalty>

**Links**

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/01/giving-fathers-time-still-isnt-enough-end-motherhood-penalty>

[2] <https://qz.com/1190807/parental-leave-isnt-enough-to-end-the-motherhood-penalty/>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/international>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/maternity-and-parental-leave>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/paternity-leave>

[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender>

[7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/wages>

[8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/equity>

[9] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/social-policy>

[10] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/data>