

Do longer maternity leaves hurt women's careers? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Career or child care? It's an unfortunate dilemma faced by every working woman with a baby on the way. Should she take a lengthy maternity leave, knowing that more time at home can improve the well-being of both mother and child? After all, research shows maternity leaves are related to lower infant mortality and reduced maternal stress. Or should she forego that long maternity leave, knowing that getting back to work quickly will improve her career opportunities?

Around the world, we are seeing a trend towards legislating longer, paid parental leaves for both mothers and fathers. Earlier this year, for example, Canada expanded its paid parental leave program from 35 weeks to 61 weeks; several Scandinavian countries have already made similar moves. These changes are motivated by a progressive concern to improve the work-life balance for working parents and encourage greater parent/child contact in those crucial first months of a newborn's life. But while the sentiment behind these new policies is well-meaning and commendable, there may be a "dark side" to longer parental leaves.

Most of the research to date in this area has focused on mothers who, in most countries, are still offered more time off than fathers. Even when parental leaves are offered to both parents to share, women tend to take the vast majority of that time, unless the policy reserves specific time for men only (which is still rare). These studies show that women who decide to take a longer time off can expect to pay a price for their commitment to motherhood when they return to work.

Evidence from a variety of countries reveals that the longer new mothers are away from paid work, the less likely they are to be promoted, move into management, or receive a pay raise once their leave is over. They are also at greater risk of being fired or demoted. Length of leave can be a factor in the perceptions of co-workers as well – women who take longer leaves are often seen as less committed to their jobs than women who take much shorter leaves. This trade-off undercuts a major goal of legislating national parental leave policies: ensuring that women don't have to choose between motherhood and career success.

To tackle this conundrum, our research sought to uncover the mechanisms driving the unintended negative consequences of longer leaves and identify ways in which organizations can help women find a balance between work and childcare. At the time of our study, Canadian parental leave policy allowed for a maximum of 12 months paid leave for women. We conducted three complementary studies to identify and examine perceptions of working women's agency (the degree to which they are considered ambitious and career-focused), as the motivator for these negative consequences. Our results highlight several ways this issue can be addressed.

First, using lab-based experiments, we tested perceptions of a potential female job candidate based on job applications showing they'd taken a maternity leave of 12 months (which is common in corporate Canada) or a shorter maternity leave of one month. We found those who noted a longer maternity leave on their resume were perceived as less desirable. Interestingly, bias that a woman who takes a longer maternity leave is less committed to her career held equally for male and female participants of the study, suggesting such a preconception is widely held.

Next, we tested how providing background information about a job candidate's career ambitions and work habits (in this case, a letter from a former supervisor) can affect opinions of her agency when a longer maternity leave was taken. Here we found that negative perceptions of commitment and hireability can be overcome by providing additional information about women's agency to decision-makers. In other words, when the letter was included, we saw no difference in the longer-leave-taking candidate's desirability.

Finally, we sought evidence from Canadian workers regarding their views on the role of "keep-in-touch" programs. These are programs that allow parents on leave to stay in contact with their workplace and colleagues while they are away. Often the leave-taker will be paired with a coworker who can, for example, keep them updated on their projects, clients, and other coworkers. In an experiment with a sample of 558 Canadian employees, we found that female applicants who took a 12 month maternity leave were perceived as more agentic, committed to their jobs, and ultimately hireable, when a "keep-in-touch" program was used, compared to when no such program was used. It should be noted that it is not enough for these programs to simply exist; these positive outcomes only occurred when women were making active use of them.

Our work, recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, helps explain why longer legislated maternity leaves are related to negative career outcomes for women. We find maternity leave length is perceived as a signal of women's agency and commitment to the

job and thus used to gauge their dedication. In turn, this undermines perceptions of women's agency, job commitment, and perceived suitability for leadership roles.

Fortunately, our results also point to some ways in which managers, organizations, and women themselves can combat the unintentional negative consequences of longer legislated maternity leaves. For example, managers can provide additional information about women's agency and career aspirations to counteract negative perceptions among decision-makers and co-workers. Further, the creation and promotion of "keep-in-touch" programs by organizations appears quite promising. While still rare in the work world, "keep-in-touch" programs have been pioneered by some progressive firms in the legal and public relations industries in Canada and Australia as a way to support and retain female employees.

Our work also has implications for policy-makers by showing that longer legislated maternity leaves may unintentionally undermine gender equality by hurting women's career prospects. Thus, such policies need to be accompanied by additional measures that encourage "keep-in-touch" or related programs. Other potential solutions may be legislating parental leaves reserved for fathers only. Currently only 13% of eligible men use any parental leave in Canada (compared to 91% of eligible new mothers), even though Canada's leave is supposed to be gender-neutral. Mandating that some portion of parental leave be used by fathers would encourage more men to take parental leaves, which in turn could reduce the amount of time women are absent from work and also make it more normative for both men and women to use leaves from work to care for their children.

Finally, a few caveats are necessary. Some of our experimental data comes from studies involving university students, who tend to have limited work experience; future research will attempt to study these situations in a wider variety of organizations. In addition, some of our effects appear small. However, the results are still meaningful and powerful because even a slightly lower rating of a woman due to her maternity leave could make a big difference whether that woman is hired or promoted. Bias against mothers in the workforce has been thoroughly documented elsewhere. We also limited our study to women and the effects of maternity leave; future research could include a broader look at the effects on fathers' careers.

The ability to take one's full parental leave without suffering diminishing one's promotion, pay, or leadership prospects is crucial for greater gender equality in the workplace and for helping all working parents, and in particular mothers, achieve greater work-life balance. While HR departments and business leaders have long had this as an item on their agenda, our research provides clear evidence on interventions and programs that can make a real difference for organizations that seek to develop, grow and retain their top talent.

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