

Reform maternity leave to meet the needs of modern women ^[1]

We should let women earn a reasonable amount of money while on leave, and make it easier to qualify for maternity leave

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Canada's maternity leave program is outdated and badly in need of an overhaul, in order to meet the needs of modern women. It is painfully bureaucratic, awkwardly shoved under the umbrella of employment insurance and penalizes women who want to do any sort of paid work while on leave, making it challenging to remain connected to our jobs while staying at home with our babies.

Recently, there were stories of pregnant women being denied access to the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program, because of a "glitch" in the 46-year-old computer program that supports the EI system. And the government still hasn't figured out what to do about pregnant women who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and don't have enough insurable hours to qualify for EI. This dilemma illustrates the real issue at play: maternity leave shouldn't be part of the EI system. It should be a stand-alone program that's tailored to the unique needs of women (and men) on maternity and parental leave.

Maternity leave came into force in Canada in 1971, in response to the growing number of women with jobs outside the home. It was introduced under the unemployment insurance program, and initially offered women 15 weeks of paid leave.

The antiquated notion that a woman's career ends when she becomes a mother was swiftly being replaced at the time. The "Mary Tyler Moore Show" was a hit, and the idea that women really could have it all took flight. Paid maternity leave was a real achievement for the second-wave feminist movement during a time when women's roles in society were dramatically changing, and it was an important step in ushering in a new era of young women breaking the glass ceiling in traditionally male-dominated professions.

Paid maternity leave gave women job protection (in theory) and some economic security while they took time off to have babies. At the time, it probably made sense to attach it to the EI program, which was already well-established.

Yet women's participation in the workforce, and the nature of work in general, has changed dramatically since the early 1970s. Women are business owners and professionals. Freelance and contract work has become the norm in the gig economy. The rigid rules of maternity leave, as it currently stands, offers little flexibility for women who work for themselves or want to keep doing some work while on leave.

Self-employed women need to jump through many hoops in order to qualify for maternity leave benefits. I hear from many who say that it is very hard to actually meet all the criteria to qualify for the benefits. And even if they do qualify, it quickly becomes more of a hassle than it is worth. The government claws back 50 cents of your EI benefits for every dollar you earn, but if you run your own business, you can't just stop working.

If you want to keep doing some work while collecting benefits that won't be subject to a clawback, the government has made it ridiculously complicated. You need to complete reports, on paper, and sign up for a special program. Once you sign up for the program, you can't change your mind later. After all that, the government will still claw back your benefits, dollar-for-dollar, on any amount earned over \$75 a week.

Many women on maternity leave want to do some work, not just to remain connected to their jobs, but for the important mental health benefits, as well. Work gives people an outlet and a connection to their community and social networks. It is also a nice break from the endless feeding and diaper-changing cycles, as well as the social isolation that comes with being stuck at home with an infant.

There have been some changes to the maternity leave program in recent years. In 2017, for example, the government allowed for extended maternity leave, thinking the only thing women want is more time at home with their babies. But flexibility is just as important. There are likely very few self-employed people who can afford to take an 18-month leave, and in many industries, it is just not practicable.

We should let women earn a reasonable amount of money while on leave, with no clawback to their benefits and no requirement to submit paper reports or sign up for special programs. And we should make it easier to qualify for maternity leave, especially for self-employed women.

Lately, we have seen how fast the government can implement and tweak programs in response to criticism. CERB, for example, was rapidly changed to allow people to be able to collect it while still earning up to \$1,000 a month. This just proves that where there is a will, there is a

way.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: maternity and parental leave ^[4]

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