

How more men taking paternity leave could save mothers' careers ^[1]

More widespread adoption of paternity leave could shift the social expectation that taking time off to care for kids is women's work.

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Source: The Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 16 Mar 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

During the first few months of maternity leave with my second child, I awoke to an early-morning e-mail from an editor that I'd worked with for years as a freelance journalist. She had taken another job and would be leaving her position within weeks. It was the fourth editor I had lost contact with since going on my six-month maternity leave.

The same thing had happened during my first maternity leave (I lost three editors that time). As a freelance writer, I rely on connections to editors at publications to hire me and assign me work.

Like many in my position, I raged. Not at my editors, but at the state of my career since I had chosen to take maternity leave. Then my rage turned to a mix of worry and exasperation: How would I bootstrap my career all over again?

But I had no choice and I simply started over, making cold calls to random newsrooms where I used to have a contact, but where I now knew almost no one. Eventually I made new contacts, but I'm still not where I was, career-wise, before I had kids.

If my story sounds familiar, it's hardly surprising. In an online survey conducted last year by researchers at London South Bank University, almost half of the participants said that taking maternity leave had hurt their careers. As well, research out of Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., found that taking a longer maternity leave can result in harmful career-related side effects because you may be seen as less ambitious or motivated.

Facing the motherhood penalty

These findings may have a lot to do with the so-called "motherhood penalty." This sociological term relates to research showing that mothers make less money and repeatedly miss out on career-advancing opportunities.

A 2019 study by the Royal Bank of Canada showed that mothers experience a significant earnings penalty. Younger moms have it the worst – in addition to making about 52 per cent of their salary during mat leave, women aged 25 to 29 lose an additional 14 per cent of their earnings over five years. Meanwhile, fathers' salaries actually rise when mothers' salaries are falling.

In a 2018 U.S. report, global child-care organization Bright Horizons looked at the impacts of maternity leave. In a survey of more than 2,000 working Americans, 69 per cent said working moms are more likely to be passed up for a new job than other employees, and 41 per cent said they perceived moms as less devoted to their work.

While better maternity leave and "back-to-work" policies in organizations would undoubtedly be beneficial for women, experts say there's something men can do to help change both culture and policy: take more paternity leave.

Dispelling the myth of child care as 'women's work'

Andrea Doucet, Canada Research Chair in gender, work and care at Brock University in St. Catherine's, Ont., has been looking at parental leave policies in Canada and says that when men take paternity leave, "It's good for everybody." However, uptake still isn't high.

"It's still a small number of men that take leave in Canada," says Dr. Doucet. "People think it's high, but it's not, it's only about 10 to 12 per cent [outside of Quebec] that take leave." (She adds that in Quebec, it's more like eight out of 10 men taking leave, as the policies in place are much better than in the rest of the country and it's become more of a social norm.)

Men taking paternity leave is "super important," Dr. Doucet says, because it begins to shift the social expectation that taking time off to care for kids is women's work. "There has to be men in the organization taking a leave because it encourages others to do so," she adds.

Because men still hold the majority of leadership positions in Canadian businesses, more widespread adoption of paternity leave could help dispel the idea of parental leave as indicating a lack of ambition or dedication to the job.

Having a "use it or lose it" policy for paternity leave like they do in Scandinavian countries would definitely help motivate men, Dr. Doucet

adds. In this kind of parental leave scheme, leave provisions are individual rights that aren't transferable to the other parent, so that when a father doesn't take part of his individual leave entitlement, the whole family loses out.

A 'ripple effect' for the whole family

Promundo, a worldwide gender equality NGO, has been conducting global research into this area since 2015 and says paternity leave is one of the best ways to have equality both in and out of the home. Their 2019 research found that when men take maternity leave, it affirms that caregiving is everyone's responsibility, helps improve pay equity and enables women to climb the career ladder.

"Men want to be equitable, involved caregivers," says Taveeshi Gupta, director of research, evaluation and learning at Promundo-US. "This dominant narrative around, 'Men just want to play with their children,' that's not the reality we've found."

Men taking more paternity leave can also improve mental health for the whole family, she adds.

"When men are supported by national and workplace policies and workplace norms – having co-workers and managers take paternity leave – then you end up having men as more involved caregivers and it will have a ripple effect," she says.

Ask Women and Work

Question: I recently made the leap from working for a company to being a small-business owner. I'm bootstrapping, which has been tough, but I'm actually starting to see some revenue. The problem is that I'm facing a lack of support from family and friends. I'm young and unattached and I feel it's the right time to give my dream a go, but no one in my life seems to agree. How can I find some small business peers – preferably women – to connect with? I live in a rural area.

We asked Karen Greve Young, CEO, Futurpreneur to field this one:

First, congratulations on making the leap to small-business ownership. It can be an amazingly fulfilling journey, and the best time to embark on your dream is the time that feels right to you. That said, entrepreneurship and small business ownership can be lonely even for those who start off with supportive networks. No one can truly understand what it's like to be a small-business owner until they are one themselves.

Canada has a rich array of support organizations and networks where you can connect with fellow owners and founders, as well as advisers who can help you access tools and resources to make bootstrapping less brutal.

There are many organizations that support women in business, including several focused on rural areas. Some of these are regionally focused, such as WESTEM, a resource for rural women in Southern Alberta in tech and Business Sisters for Rural Women in Entrepreneurship, mostly located in Ontario.

On a national level, the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub is a great resource for women entrepreneurs, with some specialized resources for rural women entrepreneurs. Another fantastic national network of regional organizations supporting women-led businesses with resources, training and networking opportunities is the Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada.

Beyond women-specific organizations, there are 267 Community Futures organizations across Canada, many focused on rural communities. Each member organization of this national network has local offices with events and resources available to entrepreneurs and small-business owners, including access to networking groups.

Many provinces have a regional network of innovation or small business organizations, often called Regional Innovation Networks/Centres (RINs or RICs) or Small Business Enterprise Centres (SBECs). These are often located in urban or rural centres and support business owners in the surrounding communities, with virtual and (in normal times) in-person events where entrepreneurs can meet and network. For example, Invest Ottawa is both an RIC and an SBEC and recently hosted a fantastic array of events around International Women's Day which drew a diverse audience of women entrepreneurs.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't invite you to our upcoming Futurpreneur Rock My Business series, supported by RBC Future Launch. These are great workshops to hone your business idea, business plan and cash flow, and to connect and network with other new and aspiring business owners – I'm happy to share that more than 40 per cent of the founders we support are women!

You can also connect with our Futurpreneur team members to learn how to apply for our 1:1 mentorship and up to \$60,000 loan program (with BDC), to help you have the financial and support resources you need to supplement your bootstrapping and help you succeed on your entrepreneurship journey. Wishing you the best of luck!

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: maternity and parental leave ^[4]

gender ^[5]

Women ^[6]

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