

# Parental leave and childcare: Why can't we make it fair for women and men? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Child rearing is not a female problem, pregnancy is. We should separate the two to give men and women real fair choices about work and family life.

However sadly in many western nations this is not the case. In the UK for example, women can take up to a year off in maternity leave, with men allowed 2 weeks during the first 20 weeks of the baby's life, and now (since 2010) fathers may take leave once the child reaches 20 weeks instead of the mother. Childcare in the UK is one of the most expensive in developed nations; with on average 68% of a second salary being spent on it.

So where did this inequality start? Maternity leave came about as recognition that women were disproportionately affected by having children. Proposed with good intentions, it is something that was introduced to compensate women somewhat for pregnancy and childbirth and to give women more flexibility to return to work. But actually is extended maternity not doing the opposite? In reality it is incentivising women to stay at home for a year, making it harder for them to be reintegrated back into the work place. Furthermore without equal provision for men to take time off this lengthy maternity leave entrenches the norm that women are the main child carers, which is unrelated to the fact that they are the child carriers during pregnancy.

This unequal start is more likely to lead to unequal consequences and discrimination towards women (such as fewer women taking senior positions at work). Why not give families more choice and let them decide who cares for their child and when? Why should the state incentivise mothers to look after the child in the initial months? Just because a woman carries the baby for 9 months does not mean she should be told she has to become the primary child carer (or make it harder for her not to be). The pregnancy and birth of children does affect women more than men. However child caring does not have to.

So we can really separate maternity leave into two parts. The first part is that which is taken at the initial stage, from the last two weeks of pregnancy and a month or two recovery period for the mother when the baby is born. This is much akin to sick leave from an operation (although I recognise it would be wrong to lump pregnancy and sick leave in the same category). From then on the second stage of maternity leave is about caring for a small child.

For the first part of course I recognise that women are disproportionately affected and therefore need leave. However I think it would be good to offer men leave in this stage as well; as the recovery of the mother post childbirth and the rearing of the child occur simultaneously. Thus it would be beneficial in two ways; firstly it would give mothers a chance to recover whilst fathers can help look after the baby (particularly necessary for women who undergo a caesarian section and cannot bend or lift for 6 weeks) and secondly it gives more choice to families to decide who will be the primary carer (or neither). If men have to return to work after 2 weeks leaving the mother on leave, it is much less likely that he will take leave again as it is quite disruptive to to and fro from work. This is therefore making it more likely that the mother will resume the role of primary carer; if and when she chooses to return to work it will be her burden to sort out care of the child.

Knowing this to be the case that men can only take 2 weeks off once the baby is born and are therefore less likely to become primary carers in the long run, women are more likely to move into less demanding positions at work where they can afford flexibility. And what's more even if they don't want to do so, they may well get discriminated against for the more demanding positions at work once it is known they are seeking to start a family (or even if it is not known that it is the case). Hopefully this can start to challenge the stereotyping and discrimination that says child caring is a female problem, even though I recognise that still more women will take the option of becoming the primary carer over men. In Sweden, more gender neutral parental leave has led to an increase of 7% in a mother's pay for every month the father takes off in leave. I'd like to one day see a world where employers reckoned there was just as much chance of a male employee taking leave or requiring flexible work/ childcare as their female counterparts.

This unequal start to the care of a baby in the UK is compounded with the barriers of extended maternity leave and expensive child care to give women and men fewer and unfair options to decide how to balance work and family life. Some of you may at this point be thinking 'ah but many women enjoy maternity leave, it is a great time to relax and spend time with your new baby at such an important stage' And indeed this may well be the case. It may also be the case that many men would like to do this; but they are not offered a year off from work at nearly full pay. And others may be thinking 'don't complain about a year off at nearly full pay when childcare is so expensive and so many benefits are being cut.' But of course the problem being that extended maternity leave is a pathetic consolation to the fact that for the next

4 years childcare will consume 68% of a mother's salary (thereafter less once they attend school) therefore, given maternity leave incentivises mothers to become the primary carer, such expensive childcare further disadvantages mothers who wish to return to work as again the provision of childcare is now seen as their problem.

Government subsidised childcare works well in other European countries to even out the gender disadvantage and has other positive effects on the country. In Denmark, where men commonly take 3 months paternity leave and parents only cover up to 25% of childcare costs, female employment is ranked 5th in the OECD and most women return to work. France (where average maternity leave is three months compared to six months in the UK ) has a birth rate at well above the EU average which clearly shows the system is encouraging to having children (this can be problematic in terms of population but at least demonstrates the efficacy of the system) Furthermore, in times of economic austerity, the cost incurred by the state is outweighed by the economic boost of more available employees and more disposable income. Similarly the costs outweigh the benefits to companies who might complain of the additional expensive of paternity leave, as more women would return to work and sooner (it usually being better to have two employees with their foot in the door than one gone completely - especially when companies have to hold open positions for returning mothers.) And of course let us not forget that this would particularly benefit poorer families; giving them and single parent families many more options meaning they are less reliant on the state. The recent pitiful tax breaks on childcare in the UK are a start, but are not enough for the 58% of parents who say they are no better off for returning to work once they factor in childcare.

Fundamentally it is about having a system which does not discriminate against either gender in terms of their role as a parent but offers full flexibility. The knock on effects, in terms of female employment, economic growth and costs to the state mean fairer parental leave and childcare provision really is a no brainer.

-reprinted from the Huffington Post

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** affordability <sup>[3]</sup>

maternity and parental leave <sup>[4]</sup>

mother's labour force participation <sup>[5]</sup>

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