

PATERNITY LEAVE : A STEP FORWARD TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

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The World Economic Forum's recently published Global Gender Gap Report 2020 is right on time with the answer: about 100 years, give or take. That's when we'll have equality at this current pace [1.]

Achieving gender equality at work should be a priority for any workplace in 2020. Several factors come into play, from the persistent gender pay gap, flexible working hours and paternity leave. A crucial part of the fight for gender equality that has been overlooked is support for men as caregivers. Around the world, laws, policies, and stigmas still push women to be caregivers and prevent men from even having the option. Paternity leave is a period of time that a father is legally allowed to be away from his job so that he can spend time with his new born. It varies substantially around the world. Paternity leave can either be paid or unpaid.

A recent UNICEF report analyzed legally protected leave for new parents in 41 of the world's richest countries and praised a handful of countries, most of them in Scandinavia, for offering paternity leave, and parental leave in general but the data from most countries is disappointing. Some of the wealthiest nations in the world provide little or no government-supported paternity leave for new parents. [2.]

Sweden is a good example of how countries are trying to break gender stereotypes through family leave and pay policy. It allows for up to 480 days of paid parental leave, provided both parents take at least 90 days each. Sweden has embraced the shared entitlement, and it's now frowned upon if the fathers do not take up a generous portion of the leave on offer. [3.]

In India, pursuant to enactment of Maternity Benefit Act, 2017, a bill known as the Paternity Benefit Bill, 2018 (PB Bill) was proposed in the Lok Sabha mandating that paternity leave of 15 days, extendable up to three months, be granted to new fathers. If the bill sees the light of day, fathers will be able to get paternity leave extendable up to

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three months. In the absence of a law, each organization is allowed to frame its own rules.

While Japan's approach to paternity leave looks very progressive with an impressive 30 weeks leave available to new fathers, in 2017, just 5% of fathers who qualified for it took paid leave. Two years after Australia started a parental leave program for new parents, only one father for every 500 mothers was taking it. In the UK, 40% of dads choose not to take the parental leave offered. And in the US, the figures are worse: 76% of men take less than a week off when their baby is born. [4.]

Turns out, regulation is only a small part of the problem. Fathers often don't take this leave, even when it's available to them, and this practice is extremely common around the world. Why are we seeing such little momentum in breaking traditional gender roles and why are young fathers not taking the legally entitled leave even when most of them are looking for a better balance between work and family ?

Financial consideration is a major factor in making leave decisions. In most countries, women still make less money as compared to men. So, economically speaking, it just simply makes more sense for fathers to continue working. The time around childbirth is often a time of stress on household budgets. Many families may feel that they cannot surrender that. For obvious reasons, fathers' use of parental leave is highest when leave is not just paid but well paid.

But the most fascinating reason is that the majority of men around the world still fear the impact it would have on their careers. Most workplaces regard a father taking a long break as not being committed to his job, leading fathers contemplating a longer leave to fear for their career and promotion prospects. The result is troubling workplace gender ratios that are impossible to dismantle.

In countries such as Finland, Norway and Germany, both parents are legally mandated to take some time off when a child is born. But in other countries, where family leave is not guaranteed by law, the responsibility then falls to companies to create policies that bring with them cultural change. While a lot of organisations are moving towards gender-neutral leave policies, offering equitable parental leave for parents and recognising the demands of changing family structures, gender norms and cultural traditions still present significant barriers to fathers taking leave.

Public policy is one of the best solutions to enable fathers to spend more time with their children. But if we want to succeed in a better sharing of paid and unpaid work

between men and women, change needs to come both from employers and fathers themselves. It's not only about promoting equality at work and at home but also about improving the quality of life for men, women and children.

As attitudes change and countries increasingly start to recognise its importance, access to paid paternity leave is improving. But globally, paternity leave is still an afterthought. This is bad, because the data are available and it's clear- When men take paternity leave, women also benefit – they end up returning to work more quickly, feeling better, and the sharing of household duties continues as a pattern for years.

Having paid maternity leave alone also skews the field against working women as companies may be less interested to hire and promote women if they see paid maternity leave as a burden. One solution is - if one works backwards – to mandate paid paternity leave. This will allow new fathers to be more hands-on with care-work, decrease the burden on new mothers and end discrimination against working women on account of maternity leave. Mandated paternity leave is a win-win scenario for the firm and the new father.

Paternity leave is one of the most effective long-term investments in changing, challenging, and shifting gender stereotypes. When men take paternity leave, it affirms that caregiving is everyone's responsibility but social change can be slow and is often divided generationally. Even as paternity leave itself may take a generation to accept, its effect on women in the workplace may take another generation to kick in. It's going to take all of us to drive the national-level policy changes that families and businesses need. But along with policies, we also need a major culture change.

REFERENCES

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