

Brief submitted to the Status of Women Committee, House of Commons of Canada, “Study of the economic security of women in Canada and equal participation of women in the Canadian economy”

Respectfully Submitted by

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Dear Committee,

Of the questions guiding your study, this brief speaks to the role of maternity, paternity and parental leave policy as a means to secure women’s economic security and equal participation in the Canadian economy. Our brief is informed by Doucet’s twenty-year research trajectory on issues of paid and unpaid work mainly within nontraditional or growing family forms (stay-at-home fathers, single fathers, and breadwinning mothers as well as new immigrant dads and LGBTQ families). Doucet and McKay’s ten-year research program on what supports or facilitates fathers’ uptake of parental leave in Ontario and Québec (Doucet and McKay, 2017; Doucet, McKay and Tremblay, 2009; McKay and Doucet, 2010; McKay, Marshall and Doucet, 2012); and a recent program of work (McKay, Mathieu, and Doucet, 2016) on socio-economic differences in access to parental leave benefits. We make four key points:

1. **Paid and unpaid work:** For two parent (mother/father) families, men’s involvement in unpaid care work advances women’s paid work and their economic security.
2. **Paternity leave:** Fathers can help to shift caregiving responsibilities, which can lead to greater economic security for women and their families.
3. **Socio-economic differences:** There is a parental leave rich and parental leave poor divide.
4. **Better data for better research:** This is needed to more clearly indicate who is entitled to parental leave, who takes leave, and who receives leave benefits.

1. Paid and unpaid work: For two parent (mother/father) families, men’s involvement in unpaid care work advances women’s paid work and their economic security

- There is a slow shift toward more equal or symmetrical sharing of care work and domestic work, but women continue to shoulder the bulk of this work and the *responsibility* for care work.
- In spite of rises in the numbers of female breadwinner families and stay-at-home father households, there are deep-seated normative assumptions in the workplace and in communities that women should be the primary caregivers and men the primary breadwinners; consequently, in many families, fathers increase working hours and

mothers reduce their employment to take up care of children.

- The lack of universal, affordable and high quality childcare is a key reason that families decide to have one stay-at-home parent (including fathers), which leads to a growing divide between those families with two sources of income and the increasing number of families with precarious earning possibilities.
- When men have the opportunity to care for children – either through parental leave or being a stay-at-home parent – this can and does lead to transformative changes for men’s lives, gender relations, gender equality, and men’s understanding (as fathers and as workers) of the vital importance of care work for democratic and just societies (Doucet, 2006, 2017, forthcoming).
- There is a need to think about adults as both workers and caregivers and to support both of these essentially intra-connected sets of activities and identities. Care work is work; breadwinning, conceptually and in some contexts, can also be viewed as part of care work in that it provides necessary economic support for families to thrive. Economic security is connected to care security and access to care services (parental leave and childcare services); these connections enable parents to care and work across the course of their lives.
- Women are more likely to work part time than men because, in many cases, they take on child-care and elder-care responsibilities. They are also more likely to experience interruptions in their careers. This also affects wages, pensions, as well as eligibility for parental leave benefits.

2. Paternity leave: Fathers can help to shift caregiving responsibilities, which can lead to greater economic security for women and their families

In Canada, leave entitlements fall under the 14 Employment Standards Acts, which are distinct but inclusive of the two leave benefit programs: *Employment Insurance (EI)* for the rest of the country and, since 2006, the *Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP)* for Québécois parents. From our research, including in-depth interviews with Ontarian and Québécois families conducted by Doucet and McKay across the past decade, several points are clear:

- Paternity leave in Québec has dramatically improved the proportion of men taking leave. For two parent (mother/father) families, this is a key financial and care provision resource for families and for women’s economic opportunities and security.
 - In 2006, 69% of eligible fathers in Québec took a period of paternity and/or parental leave, rising in 2013 to 79% (Doucet, Lero, McKay, and Tremblay, 2016). Some 60,000 fathers use the regime each year and of this number, two-thirds take the whole of the paternity leave (three or five weeks, depending on the option chosen), while a third also take some parental leave weeks;
 - *Outside of Quebec*, the absence of paternity leave has led to *less men* taking leave. While there had been a steady increase in the take-up rate of parental leave benefits among eligible fathers in Canada (excluding Québec), from 9% in 2004 to 11% in 2011 suggesting that more couples were sharing benefits. But this trend did not continue after 2011; outside Québec the percentage of fathers who claimed or intended to claim parental leave decreased from 11% in 2011 to 9.4% in 2012. In 2014, for all provinces combined (i.e. including Québec), there was a

decrease in the proportion of fathers who claimed or intended to claim parental leave: from 30.9% in 2013 to 27.1% in 2014.

- Our findings support a growing international argument that **designated paternity leave** (that neither ‘takes away’ mothers’ maternity leave time, nor impinges on breastfeeding time in the early months of an infant’s life), implemented in a ‘use it or lose it’ scheme and with low eligibility criteria—as in Québec, Sweden and Norway—is a key motivator for fathers to take up care leave.
- Parental leave decisions are also shaped by ideological and social norms in workplaces and communities. As determined by our research, whether or not fathers took leave, and the duration and timing of that leave, was influenced by the displayed or anticipated responses of bosses and work colleagues, as well as extended family and community peers. While mothers did not encounter problems (with the exception of one mother who lost her job after taking leave), employers generally did not expect or encourage fathers to take some or any leave. Managers—like many parents and others—regarded this period of infant care as reserved for mothers.
- What facilitates fathers’ take up of leave are supportive workplaces and/or a legal right to individual entitlement leave.

3. Socio-economic differences: There is a parental leave rich and parental leave poor divide

In our interviews with families, we found that the EI benefit program is not aligned with parents’ changing work and education patterns. Some parents ineligible for benefits were acquiring university degrees, which will benefit household earnings in the long term. Other ineligible parents had non-standard employment, such as short-term contracts, or were at home caring for older children because childcare was not available and/or unaffordable. EI parental leave benefits are designed for parents with full-time, standard employment, not the varied employment arrangements (often precarious) that are the reality of today’s labour market and gendered patterns of work.

The research conducted by McKay, Mathieu and Doucet (2016) found that there is a rich-poor gap in receipt of maternity/parental leave benefits among Canadian mothers. This gap is both geographic, reflecting the two benefit programs, and income-related. In Canada:

- Women work throughout their lives and contribute to EI. An average of 25% of mothers pay into EI during pregnancy but do not have enough hours to qualify for parental leave. Other mothers pay into EI for their whole working lives but do not make the cut when it matters; accumulating 600 hours in 52 weeks prior to giving birth stands as their major barrier to benefits access.
- Of all mothers off-reserve, 64% receive parental benefits under EI across nine provinces, compared to 89% in Québec. This means under EI, 36% of mothers do not qualify, compared with only 11% in Québec.
- ***Mothers in lower-income families are most excluded, with 56% left out under EI, compared with 15% in Québec.***
- The socio-economic difference is stark under EI, with mothers in higher-earning families receiving 30% more parental leave benefits compared to lower-earning families.

- In Québec, this difference is only 10%. Québec improved take-up among families earning less than \$30,000/year by 21% over six years, from 64% in 2007 to 85% in 2013.

We suggest that *radically different eligibility criteria* (EI requires 600 hours versus QPIP requiring \$2,000, which is 186 hours at \$10.75 minimum wage) may explain the broader inclusiveness of the Québec program.

2016 Proposed Changes to EI Maternity and Parental Leave

The revision currently on the table for Canada’s parental leave policy will exacerbate the rich-poor gap in parental leave, as well as the gendered wage gap. It is a poorly crafted policy in terms of women’s economic security, especially for mothers without standard, well-paid, full-time employment.

Extending the duration of leave (and/or permitting non-contiguous periods), especially without increasing the total wage replacement amount, repeats the pattern started in 2001 by Jean Chrétien whereby most will have longer parental leaves, but a significant portion of the population will be excluded from this opportunity.

Families generally chose the lowest earners to take leave, especially for longer leave periods, because it has less of an impact on household income loss. Given that women earn less than men, as a whole, the proposed policy of 18-month leaves means that more women will be on leave from work for longer. This will have a detrimental effect on their long-term earnings and therefore increase both the gendered wage gap and women’s risk of long-term poverty.

EI caregiving (and regular) benefits are designed for parents with standard employment (full-time, salaried, steady employment), yet the federal Finance Minister recently told younger workers to expect “job churn.” To ensure women’s economic security, income security programs need to be updated to reflect the reality of the current labour market, the economic contributions and privatized consequences of women’s unpaid care work, and the *pattern of women’s labour market attachment over their lifetimes*.

The consultations held on changes to maternity and parental leave benefits presented the public with choices between pre-determined options. No evidence was provided to support proposed changes, nor was there any evidence that a gender-based analysis was conducted.

4. Better data for better research: This is needed to more clearly indicate who is entitled to parental leave, who takes leave, and who receives leave benefits

Finally, there is an urgent need for stronger data on parental leave access, use, and benefit levels. In terms of national accounting, Statistics Canada must report by program, rather than nationally, to identify differences between the Canadian and Québec programs. There is a need for stronger data on *which* mothers and fathers qualify for and take leave, *for how long, and at what level of benefits* (including employer top-up data). The current design of the Employment Insurance Coverage Survey asks questions about fathers through mothers, and even more narrowly, through mothers’ predictions about fathers’ “intended average weeks off” (Statistics Canada, 2015). These questions should be posed directly to fathers. Moreover, data is needed on maternity and parental leave access and take up in Canada’s three territories (where many

Indigenous people reside) as well as on reserves. In addition to gender issues, we need to know more about how class differences, single parenthood, young parenthood and jurisdictional and parental leave program differences affect the lives of the unemployed, the working poor, part-time workers, Indigenous and new immigrant families in terms of their possibilities for parental leave access and up take.

Recommendations to Improve Women's Income Security

We have a model for greater support for mothers right here in Canada: the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP). Consider that Québec's leave benefit program improved economic support for families earning less than \$30,000/year by 21% over six years, from 64% in 2007, to 85% in 2003.

QPIP has lower eligibility criteria, requiring \$2,000 income (186 hours at the minimum wage of \$10.75), compared to 600 hours of employment under EI. Looking further abroad, in at least five countries (Finland, Spain, Sweden, Austria and Norway) zero hours of paid work are required and leave benefits are considered a universal right. QPIP also improves mothers' economic security by:

- Integrating self-employed workers in qualification parameters, ensuring that female entrepreneurs are not penalized for creating businesses and growing the economy.
- Raising wage replacement rates (notably, both EI and QPIP programs need to raise these rates and peg the 'floor' annual earning level to be eligible for a low-income supplement to reflect inflation so that lower-earning families can afford to take longer-duration leaves).
- Offering paternity leave—only individual entitlement to leave benefits (and, secondarily, high wage replacement rates) ensures fathers take leave to care for children.
- Giving new parents the choice between lower benefits for a longer period (basic plan) or higher benefits for a shorter period (special plan).

Finally, the policy areas of parental leave and childcare need to be considered together.

Conclusion

More and more mothers are the breadwinners in Canadian families; many are single parents, some are self-employed, some are students. Gender-based policy analysis is needed to ensure that women's employment patterns, as well as sex and gender differences in gestating, birthing, feeding and caring for children, cease to impose barriers to women's labour market participation and access to economic support for unpaid care work.

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