

# Engineers Canada's submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

## Review of the Employment Insurance (EI) program

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## Overview

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Engineers Canada is the national organization that represents the 12 provincial and territorial engineering regulators that license the more than 300,000 members of the engineering profession in Canada. As the only national voice for the engineering profession, our organization has a long-standing history of working and collaborating with the federal government to help inform and develop legislation, regulations, and policies.

Engineers Canada would like to thank the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for the opportunity to provide our comments on the review of the Employment Insurance (EI) Program. After reviewing the EI Program, we recommend that the federal government create flexible parental leave options within the current Employment Insurance (EI) program

## Inequalities in Canada's current parental leave structure

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Canada's parental leave system has undergone several key policy changes that include changing the method of calculating benefits, reducing waiting periods, and providing a second extension of leave.<sup>1</sup> Although these modifications have been made over the years, the parental leave system has never fully adapted or responded to the care-work lives of the growing number of Canadian parents who remain structurally excluded or negatively impacted by employment-based leave policies. The lack of implementation seen in the workforce regarding the parental leave system is partly due to the nature of precarious, non-standard, contracted, or temporary work arrangements. Some of the negative impacts arising from the current parental leave system include a lack of flexibility for individuals desiring work while on leave, obstacles with career opportunities, or unattained insurable qualifying work hours. There are significant gaps regarding how the federal government will redesign parental benefits to ensure that more parents, regardless of their style of work, qualify for parental leave benefits and remain connected to the workforce while supporting their growing family.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed systemic exclusions in access to parental leave benefits and disruptions to Canadians' ability to stay connected with their employer while on leave; specifically, for women on leave. With the suspension or reduced accessibility of care and educational services for children, such as childcare, schooling, after-school programs, and summer camps, it has been women who have carried most of the burden of the responsibilities to care for children.

In May 2020, Statistics Canada reported that 1.5 million more women than men had lost their jobs over a two-month period due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Shouldering the burden of unpaid care work at home, as well as a lack of viable flexible work options while on parental leave, has significantly impacted women's active participation in the national economy. Women's employment in Canada has plummeted

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons (2016). "Report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities." Retrieved February 23, 2021 from: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/HUMA/Reports/RP8363042/humarp03/humarp03-e.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada (2021). "Measuring labour market impacts as COVID-19 restrictions gradually ease." Retrieved February 23, 2021 from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200605/dq200605a-eng.htm>.

from a historic high to its lowest level in 30 years.<sup>3</sup> The disruption to women’s work in the national economy will have long-term consequences to their access to EI benefits, as well as their ability to maintain a professional relationship with their employer and extended networks while on parental leave. Disruption to women’s contributions to the national economy is compounded due to the fact that some women find it difficult, if not impossible, to return to the workforce after a parental leave. These absences affect future EI and CPP eligibility and benefits, along with other pension contribution opportunities, which can have adverse impacts on a woman’s financial independence and/or viability later in life.

## **Flexible parental leave benefits – best practices**

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Introducing flexible parental leave options is a viable first step to ensuring that individuals maintain their relationship with their employer and projects while on parental leave. Several Nordic countries have implemented a successful flexible parental leave model that works to support growing families and their desire to remain connected to the workforce. One example of a flexible and modernized parental leave model comes from Sweden.

Fundamentally, Sweden’s parental leave insurance policy is not just about providing individual families the flexibility to make choices about employment and caregiving; it is a social policy that aims to increase gender equality in the labour market. Swedish parental leave policies allow for flexibility in how couples decide to use postnatal benefits. While both parents are entitled to 240 days of leave, 90 of those days are earmarked as a minimum for each parent. Parents also have the right to take their leave in multiple separate blocks, as well as work part-time during their parental leave period. For instance, individuals can work shorter days and be compensated for the difference in pay, up until their child turns eight.<sup>4</sup> This flexibility allows employees to remain connected to projects, professional development opportunities, and industry networks while on parental leave. In 2020, Sweden had a female participation rate of 81.74 per cent in the national economy<sup>5</sup> compared to Canada’s 73.8 per cent in the same year.<sup>6</sup> The introduction of a flexible paid parental leave could be an explanation for this inclusive national workforce.

## **Providing increased workforce inclusion and flexibility with Canada’s current parental leave benefits**

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In Canada, parental leave is premised on labour force attachment. As a result, inequalities in the labour market are translated into inequalities in the receipt of paid parental benefits, although the extent of

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<sup>3</sup> RBC (2021). “Pandemic Threatens Decades of Women’s Labour Force Gains.” Retrieved from: <https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/pandemic-threatens-decades-of-womens-labour-force-gains/>.

<sup>4</sup> TemaNord. (2006). “Nordic experiences with parental leave and its impact on equality between women and men.” Retrieved from: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:701827/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> International Labour Organization (2021). “Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15-64)(modeled ILO estimate)-Sweden.” Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.ACTI.FE.ZS?locations=SE>.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada (2020). “Unemployment rate, participation rate and employment rate by sex, annual.” Retrieved March 11, 2021 from: [Unemployment rate, participation rate and employment rate by sex, annual \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-602-x/2020001/article/00001-eng.htm).

inequalities are contingent on gender and geographical location.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the engineering profession, Canada’s current parental leave structure within the EI program does not meet the flexibility needs of licensed engineers. Providing flexible parental benefits in Canada’s EI program, with the caveat that employees can have flexible work options, would benefit all genders in the engineering profession greatly.

The project-based nature of engineering work can result in individuals, particularly women, experiencing career obstacles while on leave—including the reality that some employees may not be given contracts for large projects with parental leave on the horizon. Engineers, and others in project-based industries, may benefit from being able to work on projects on a part-time basis while on leave to maintain their professional relationships and relevance. A modernized parental leave model, similar to Sweden, could work to improve both flexibility, relevance, and gender equity in Canada’s economy.

With the stark decline of women’s participation in the national economy, a federal policy that allows for compensation for part-time work, as well as an EI top-up, may greatly increase the representation, equity, and inclusion of women in the economy. Women should not have to volunteer or work for free to stay engaged in their profession. Allowing women to work part-time, while receiving parental leave benefits would encourage retention while simultaneously protecting professional competence, advancement, and professional development. A flexible process for parental leave that does not require parents to cease working to raise a young family would help mitigate denial of opportunities and assignments, all while supporting a more flexible framework for women considering both their careers and having children. A flexible parental leave policy would enable all genders to participate in balancing childcare responsibilities with career aspirations and may support dismantling the gender-based socio-economic structure for paid work in Canada.

## How the engineering profession is working to support employees on leave

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Women are underrepresented in both post-secondary engineering education and the engineering profession, as only 14 per cent of practicing professional engineers are women and 23.4 per cent of undergraduate engineering students are women. The engineering profession in Canada can better understand, and therefore protect the public interest, if it is representative of the demographics of the public it serves. Diversity in engineering means engaging the best minds in the profession and bringing many perspectives and experiences to each of the problems and opportunities that the engineering profession must address.

One way to ensure that women remain active in Canada’s engineering profession is through a comprehensive and flexible parental leave program within Canada’s current EI program in Canada. A flexible parental leave program would promote flexibility for employees to remain connected to projects, career advancements, networks, and professional development opportunities. This would support the consistent flow of innovative ideas that are required to solve complex engineering problems and support

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<sup>7</sup> University of Toronto (2020). “Reconceptualizing Parental Leave Benefits in COVID-19 Canada: From Employment Policy to Care and Social Protection Policy.” Retrieved from: <https://utpjournals.press/doi/10.3138/cpp.2020-091>

the growth of the overall percentage of women in Canada's labour market; an important federal investment in supporting Canada's economy and innovative output post-COVID-19

Engineers Canada continually works to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion to attract and retain underrepresented individuals in the engineering profession. Our organization has designed and implemented inclusion strategies, with a focus on increasing the representation of both women and Indigenous peoples in engineering. One area that is crucial for the retention of skilled and valued talent is improving career transitions; specifically, when it comes to managing leaves of absence or parental leave. Engineers Canada's member association, the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta, created a planning resource guide titled "Managing Transitions" upon which Engineers Canada's and Geoscientists Canada's "[\*Managing Transitions: Before, During and After Leave\*](#)" is based. This guide outlines best practices for employees and employers alike to manage maternity or parental leave in Canada's engineering and geoscience professions.

Engineers Canada is also actively working to support the recruitment, retention, and professional development of women in the engineering profession; specifically, through our [\*30 by 30 initiative\*](#). Reaching 30 by 30 will help drive cultural change in the engineering profession, supporting the even greater involvement of women in engineering.

The federal government's willingness to coordinate and collaborate with key stakeholders, particularly the engineering profession, is essential in providing flexible parental leave options that work for both employers and employees seeking leave. The engineering profession is ready and willing to provide transparent, accountable, and credible work to the federal government's initiatives to support women's active participation in the national economy. Our past involvement with the federal government demonstrates how we can constructively engage and support your efforts.