

How Laws and Policies Reinforce Inequality in Caring for Children

Among women who gave birth in Iceland in 1997, just over half were back at work thirteen months later. For men who became fathers the same year, however, work hours steadily increased.¹

At the time, Iceland provided three months of paid leave to new parents, which was paid at a low flat rate. The first month was reserved for the mother, but the latter two could theoretically be taken by either parent. However, no leave was specifically designated for fathers, and men could access the shared parental leave only with the mother's approval. Between 1993 and 1998, just 0.3 percent as many men as women received paid parental leave payments from the country's social security office. Each year, the total number of fathers accessing leave nationwide ranged from a mere eight to seventeen.²

The turn of the century brought a dramatic change. In 2000, parliament passed a new law extending paid parental leave to nine months per household. Most critically, the law reserved three months for each parent, which could not be transferred to the other. In other words, for the first time, fathers had a substantial period of leave earmarked exclusively for their use. Further, the legislation significantly increased the wage replacement rate, making it more affordable for both parents to take leave.

The effects were immediate. In 2001, for every 100 mothers who applied for parental leave, so did eighty-two fathers—a dramatic shift from mothers' near-exclusive use of leave a few years prior. Still, norms weren't fully overhauled overnight: on average, fathers took only thirty-nine days compared to mothers' 186; relatively few men were taking the full three reserved months at first. Within a few years, however, this gap markedly narrowed, with fathers taking over half as many days as mothers (ninety-six compared to 182) by 2004.

In the decades since, Iceland has built on the success of this model, making gender equality a cornerstone of its approach to supporting parents. As of 2021,

mothers and fathers each get six months of leave following the birth or adoption of a child, only one month of which can be transferred to the other parent if they wish. During leave, parents receive 80 percent of their usual wages. Despite some periods of economic instability in the years since Iceland first began reserving parental leave for men, fathers' take-up has remained high. As of 2017, 86 percent of new fathers in Iceland took leave, averaging ninety-one total days compared to mothers' 180.³

Higher take-up of leave by men has in turn helped narrow gender gaps at home and at work. A series of surveys of Icelandic parents whose first children were born in 1997, 2003, and 2009 revealed a steady increase in equitable caregiving alongside the new parental leave policy's rollout. Among parents who had their first child in 1997—before the new leave law was enacted—89 percent reported that the mother primarily cared for the child during the day for their first month of life, while just 10 percent said that care was shared equally. In contrast, for firstborns born in 2003, 34 percent of households reported that mothers and fathers shared care equally during the first month. And critically, greater equality in caregiving continued after the newborn stage: 59 percent of families whose first child was born in 2009 reported that care was shared equally by the time the child turned three, compared to just 49 percent of those born in 2003 and 36 percent of those born in 1997.⁴ Ensuring babies and toddlers have adequate time with both their parents can influence lifelong bonds and relationships. Meanwhile, a 2010 study found that more women started working full-time and fewer were working part-time after the law was passed; at the same time, slightly more men began working part-time.⁵ Further, between 1991 and 2005, the gender gap in labor force participation narrowed by 5 percentage points.

Iceland's example illustrates how countries' approaches to supporting infant caregiving can directly and substantially affect men's ability to engage fully at home as well as women's opportunities in the economy. Decisions about family caregiving are deeply shaped by norms, but they are also shaped by laws; moreover, laws themselves directly influence norms and cultural expectations.

As this chapter explores, however, Iceland is at the vanguard—and many countries have yet to take the first step of providing any leave to men. This gender inequality in paid leave pushes men and women toward unequal roles at home, with cascading consequences for equality at work and long-term engagement in caregiving. In the workforce, when public- and private-sector policies and practices provide support for caregiving by women only, women are penalized. Women face discrimination from employers who presume that they are more likely than their male colleagues to take time off to care for a child.

And while leave is one key element, early childhood care and education are equally critical: across many countries, when childcare is unavailable or unaffordable, women disproportionately leave the workforce. These departures not only undermine gender equality in the labor market but also widen inequalities based

on socioeconomic status, as those families with fewer economic resources are least likely to be able to pay for nonfamily care. Further, when inaccessible childcare pushes mothers to leave the workforce, their families' risk of falling into poverty increases; past research has shown that households with a single male breadwinner are more vulnerable to economic shocks than families in which both parents work for pay.⁶

In this chapter we survey the landscape of what countries are doing and examine how different policy choices shape gender equality in the economy and caregiving. For example, how many countries guarantee paid leave to both new mothers and new fathers? Are these policies equally available to all types of workers and all types of families? What are the consequences for gender equality in paid work when countries fail to provide leave? How can countries design paid leave policies to actively support greater gender equality at home and at work? And finally, what steps are countries taking to ensure childcare and early childhood education are available to everyone, and what are the impacts on families and workplaces?

PAID LEAVE FOR INFANT CAREGIVING
BY ALL PARENTS: WHY IT MATTERS
FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND BEYOND

Most countries around the world have adopted at least one approach to providing paid leave when families are welcoming a new baby. Leave that is available only to one parent is often described using the following terms: (1) *maternity leave*, or leave that is exclusively available to the mother; (2) *paternity leave*, which is leave that is designated for fathers; and (3) *partner leave*, which is leave available to the birth mother's spouse or partner. In addition, some countries also offer *parental leave* or *childcare leave*. *Parental leave* is used to describe many different types of approaches. In some countries, it refers to a shared leave entitlement that either parent can use. In others, it is used to describe longer gender-neutral entitlements to paid leave that are separately available to each parent. Some countries also use it holistically to describe all leave available after the birth or adoption of a child, encompassing leave separately reserved for mothers and fathers, as well as the shared entitlement. *Childcare leave* generally refers to leave available after the first year of life to care for children. It can be lengthy, enabling parents to stay home until their child is age two or three, or just a few days a year to meet care needs beyond infancy. In this chapter, we'll be focused on lengthier leaves. Many countries provide more than one type of leave—for example, by guaranteeing a period of maternity leave to support a birth mother's health before and after birth and the establishment of breastfeeding, alongside separate periods of parental and paternity leave to support infant care and bonding by all parents.

Over the past 100 years, advocates, international organizations, policy makers, and researchers have all played a role in shaping the development of leave policies across countries. At the same time, evolving norms, beliefs, and evidence about gender, work, and care have made approaches to infant caregiving a dynamic area of policy that has seen—and continues to see—significant changes across countries, as Iceland's example suggests.

What were the key victories and missed opportunities? In enacting paid leave for new parents, what goals were advocates and policy makers seeking to advance, and how well did those policies advance those goals? And what does the current body of evidence on leave tell us about the benefits for everyone of supporting all parents in accessing and providing the best care they can?

Advancing Paid Leave: Benefits for Women's Employment Outcomes

One of the primary benefits of paid leave for new parents is its impacts on women's ability to remain in the workforce. This rationale shaped some of the earliest efforts to advance maternity leave as well as more recent efforts to advance paternity or parental leave. For example, at the International Congress of Working Women (ICWW), which convened 200 women from nineteen countries to identify priorities for the newly formed International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1919,⁷ paid maternity leave was one central topic of debate at a time when many women were fired or banned from jobs once married or pregnant. Drawing inspiration from the existing maternity leave policies in a minority of countries, ICWW delegates agreed that women should have a period of paid time off from work to recover from childbirth and care for their newborns, along with breastfeeding breaks and childcare close to their workplaces.⁸ The set of recommendations ultimately influenced international law: later that year, the ILO adopted the Maternity Protection Convention, which established the right to six weeks of paid, job-protected maternity leave as well as paid breastfeeding breaks for working mothers. In 1952, the Convention was revised to increase the minimum standard for maternity leave to twelve weeks; in 2000, the standard was once again extended, to fourteen weeks. The 2000 Convention further established that maternity leave should be paid at a minimum of two-thirds of regular wages.

In what would come as no surprise to the ICWW delegates, research over the past several decades has confirmed that a key benefit of maternity leave is its support for women's labor force attachment. For example, one study of 117 countries found that women ages twenty-five to fifty-five are more likely to participate in the labor force when paid maternity leave of moderate length is available.⁹ Further, job-protected paid leave makes it more likely that women will return to the same workplace. For example, a 1999 analysis found that women's access to paid maternity leave in Britain and paid maternity and/or parental leave in Japan made it more likely that women returned to the same employer;¹⁰ in this way, women's

access to leave not only supports their individual employment outcomes but also reduces employers' turnover costs.¹¹ In contrast, in the United States, research demonstrated that having a baby significantly increased the odds of job loss in the absence of paid leave.¹²

Some evidence also suggests impacts on wages: a 1998 study found that women's access to maternity leave either through their employers (in the United States) or through a national policy (in the United Kingdom) was associated with higher wages for up to five years after childbirth for women who returned to work after their children were born.¹³ However, the duration of leave taken by women may influence its effects on work outcomes. Some studies suggest that particularly long leaves—for example, a year or more—may be negatively associated with women's earnings.¹⁴

This finding underscores the need for leave policies that support and encourage men's take-up, thereby allowing both parents to take a moderate period of leave while maintaining their careers. Yet although protections for maternity leave date back over a century, only more recently have countries begun to make paid leave available to fathers through either paternity leave or parental leave. In Brazil, for example, the legislature enacted a single day of paid leave specifically for new fathers in 1943, which was expanded to five days in 1988.¹⁵ Parental leave came later; worldwide, it was not enacted at the national level until 1974, when Sweden became the first country to provide leave that was longer than the available paternity leaves at the time and could be taken by either the mother or the father.¹⁶

In many countries, the introduction and expansion of both parental and paternity leave followed calls to facilitate men's greater involvement in caregiving in order to support women's equal economic opportunities. For example, Denmark advanced paternity and parental leave on the assumption that facilitating more equal parenting would make it more likely that women could return to work.¹⁷

These predictions have been borne out by the data: like research on maternity leave, studies of paternity and parental leave have found benefits for women's employment, particularly when a portion of the leave is reserved for fathers and is nontransferable. In Norway, the introduction of a ten-week fathers' quota, alongside affordable childcare, increased women's labor force attachment.¹⁸ In California, two studies found that the introduction of an individual entitlement to paid parental leave for each parent was associated with increased wages and working hours for mothers with young children.¹⁹ In Sweden, where sixty days of the parental leave were exclusively reserved for fathers beginning in 2002, a 2010 paper found that for each month of parental leave taken by her partner, a woman's subsequent earnings increased by nearly 7 percent.²⁰ In Spain, the introduction of thirteen days of paternity leave increased mothers' probability of reemployment

following childbirth by 11 percent.²¹ Additionally, evidence suggests that policies specifically designed to increase men's take-up of leave—whether father-specific leave or incentives for fathers to take leave—lead to improvements in attitudes toward women in the workplace.²²

Further rigorous research is needed to examine the effects of paid maternity, parental, and paternity leave on women's economic outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs); to date, most studies have focused on high-income contexts. What is already clear, however, is that when women are able to stay in the workforce, entire economies benefit. One estimate found that equalizing labor force participation rates among men and women would add \$12 trillion to the global economy over a decade.²³ Among countries that have provided paid maternity and/or parental leave for the past few decades, rates of female employment have boosted GDP per capita growth by 10–20 percent.²⁴

While the demonstrated benefits of paid leave for women's economic outcomes are substantial, the absence of supportive policies can worsen inequalities. Indeed, one common economic consequence of failing to provide leave is that mothers depart the labor force—temporarily or permanently. For example, in the United States, recent estimates indicate that nearly a third of women quit their jobs after having a child,²⁵ and economists have identified the lack of “family-friendly” policies, such as paid leave, as one reason women's labor force participation in the United States has stagnated compared to its peers.²⁶ In the aggregate, these decisions to leave the workforce—which often aren't truly choices at all, but the only option available—have significant consequences for the gender pay gap, women's representation in leadership positions, and families' financial resilience. For example, across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the average pay gap between men and women without children is 7 percent; for those with children, it's 22 percent.²⁷

Further, when leave is inaccessible or available only to women, employers commonly discriminate against women of childbearing age, presuming that they and they alone will take leave for caregiving.²⁸ These same stereotypes can also result in discrimination against men who (unexpectedly) choose to take leave, especially if that leave is for a longer duration. As one example, in the United States, hundreds of fathers working at JPMorgan brought a class action lawsuit after being denied access to the company's sixteen-week parental leave policy, based on the presumption they were not the “primary caregivers” for their babies and therefore ineligible under the terms of the policy.²⁹ After months of litigation, the fathers won a record \$5 million settlement. For Derek Rotondo, one of the men who brought the case, the ruling was an important step toward “get[ting] rid of some of these stereotypes where it's the woman's job to have babies and cook and the man gets back to work and pays the bills. That doesn't work for everyone; it's not the century that we live in.”³⁰

*Advancing Gender Equality at Home: Benefits of Men's
Engaged Fatherhood*

As the JPMorgan example suggests, a second major benefit of paid leave is its support of greater gender equality at home. Providing paid leave to men can enable fathers to engage more deeply in caregiving and facilitate more equal roles between parents. And beyond the intrinsic benefits for men, supporting fathers' greater involvement with their children can have indirect benefits for women's economic outcomes, as more equitable distribution of household work can enable women to devote more time to their careers.

Advocates and lawmakers have explicitly noted the importance of paid leave in supporting men's engagement as fathers. In France, a 2002 extension of the duration of paid paternity leave from three days to fourteen days aimed to advance a new norm of "involved fatherhood."³¹ In Iceland, advocates as far back as 1975 called attention to how even a brief period of father-specific leave could support bonding and make a powerful difference for families during the newborn stage:

It is essential that fathers get a 1–2 week leave from work when a child is born. Women cannot be expected to tend to a newborn child, and perhaps more children, a week after giving birth. They need longer rest. Additionally, it is very important to strengthen the relationship between father and child and that the relationship is established as early as possible.³²

Surveys show that men want to take on a greater role at home. According to the 2019 *State of the World's Fathers* report, 85 percent of fathers across the seven countries surveyed—Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, the United States, and the United Kingdom—reported that they would "do anything" to be "very involved in the early weeks and months of caring for their newly born or adopted child."³³

Further, as with studies confirming the anticipated benefits of maternity leave, recent research has empirically demonstrated that paid leave for fathers does indeed support their greater involvement in caregiving both initially and later in the child's life.³⁴ For example, in Quebec, the introduction of two months' parental leave reserved for fathers led to men spending 2.2 additional hours each week providing care for their children on their own.³⁵ Likewise, leave for fathers supports more equal distribution of other household work. For example, in Norway, after the introduction of a four-week quota of parental leave for new fathers, families were 50 percent more likely to report that they equally shared responsibilities for doing the laundry, and 11 percent less likely to report having conflicts about the division of household work.³⁶ In contrast, when women alone take long periods of leave, gender equality in household work declines.³⁷

Moreover, studies have found that when fathers take leave alone—that is, not concurrently with the mother—they have an even greater opportunity to bond

with their child and develop a pattern of greater participation in caregiving. A qualitative study of Quebec fathers found that those who took at least one month of parental leave by themselves reported developing strong bonds with their babies and greater confidence as parents. Likewise, the fathers noted the economic benefits for their partners.³⁸

However, all of these benefits occur only if men are able to take the leave available to them. Men's leave-taking may be limited in the context of gender-unequal norms, workplaces that pressure male employees to have their female partners use the available parental leave, and poorly paid leave. Simply making leave available to men is rarely enough. In Sweden, men used less than 10 percent of the total parental leave days available until the 1990s.³⁹ Worse yet, in Israel, where under the 1997 parental leave policy men are eligible for leave only if the mother forfeits it, just 246 men took any paid parental leave in 2007, compared to 88,147 women.⁴⁰

In contrast, paternity leave, which is clearly designated for men, or "use it or lose it" leave has been more successful. In Spain, for instance, a 2007 law introducing two weeks' paid paternity leave substantially boosted fathers' take-up of leave.⁴¹ Similarly, when South Korea introduced one year of nontransferable leave for each parent in 2007, the share of men taking leave increased threefold.⁴² After Sweden supplemented its parental leave policy with a two-week quota for fathers in 1995, leave-taking by men soared: just 46 percent of fathers whose babies were born two weeks before the policy change took parental leave, compared to 82 percent of those whose babies were born in the two weeks after the quota was introduced.⁴³

The wage replacement rate also matters. Due to global gender pay gaps, men remain more likely than women to have higher earnings across countries. As a result, a low wage replacement rate can deter men from taking leave since it would result in a greater drop in household income, which contributes to men's low take-up of "gender-neutral" parental leave. A study from Luxembourg, for example, found that the higher the father's income relative to the mother's, the less likely he was to take leave.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, in Germany, fathers who earned less than their partners were more than three times as likely to take paid leave as fathers whose income was similar to their partners'.⁴⁵

A higher wage replacement rate can lead to higher participation by men. For example, in Sweden, a study found that parents took 92 percent of available leave days that were paid at 80 percent or more of regular earnings, and just 69 percent of days paid at a low flat rate.⁴⁶ Altogether, studies suggest that replacing at least 67 percent of regular earnings is important to ensure modest take-up by men, while replacing 80–100 percent is necessary for widespread take-up.⁴⁷

Similarly, some leave policies provide a household with additional leave or a financial incentive as a "bonus" if both parents share the available leave. This approach has also been found to support greater gender equality in leave-taking. This was what happened in Germany: within the first seven years that a two-month

bonus was offered if fathers took at least two months of the shared parental leave, the proportion of German fathers taking leave grew nearly tenfold.⁴⁸

And importantly, emerging evidence suggests these policies can also influence norms about gender and work. In a recent study of nine European countries undertaken with colleagues, we measured whether attitudes toward women's work improved in countries that adopted new policies incentivizing fathers to take parental leave or providing at least two weeks of paid paternity leave, compared to countries without equivalent policy changes. Merging our data on leave policies globally with World Values Survey data on social attitudes, we found that in countries that adopted more supportive paternal leave policies, women and men were 27 percent more likely to disagree with the statement, "When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women."⁴⁹

These types of positive impacts have been recognized by policy makers. For example, in a 2010 directive that is binding on all EU members, the European parliament called on all countries to adopt a month of nontransferable parental leave for fathers. In 2019, the European Union revised, lengthened, and strengthened this directive and underscored men's low take-up of transferable parental leave:

As most fathers do not avail themselves of their right to parental leave, or transfer a considerable proportion of their leave entitlement to mothers, this Directive extends from one to two months the minimum period of parental leave which cannot be transferred from one parent to the other in order to encourage fathers to take parental leave, while maintaining the right of each parent to take at least four months of parental leave.⁵⁰

At the international level, however, leadership on paternity and parental leave has been lacking. Though the ILO maternity convention is now over 100 years old, the organization has yet to adopt or seriously consider a paternity convention, despite its stated commitments to gender equality and equal rights at work for all. In 1981, the ILO adopted the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, which broadly alludes to policies to support working parents but makes no explicit mention of paid leave. Similarly, the Maternity Leave Recommendation—a non-binding guidance document adopted alongside the 2000 convention—vaguely supports the adoption of leave that can be shared between parents, but does not specifically encourage the adoption of father-specific leave except in cases where the mother dies during her own leave.⁵¹

This lack of a global standard and the absence of a clear statement from the ILO about why paid leave for both parents is essential represent a missed opportunity.⁵² The global recognition of particular labor standards can be an important step toward creating norms that shape working conditions across countries. The relative silence on paternity and parental leave by the ILO, compared to the three conventions on maternity leave, serves to reinforce the idea that caring for

children is primarily the responsibility of individual women, rather than a fundamental need that every country should seek to integrate with the employment conditions of all its workers, regardless of gender.

*Improving the Well-Being of Families and Societies:
Broader Benefits for Health*

Finally, beyond its positive impacts on gender equality at work and at home, paid leave for new parents has a range of benefits for infants' and parents' health and children's development and education.⁵³ For example, a study of sixteen high-income European countries, the United States, and Japan found that an increase in paid leave of ten weeks was associated with reduced infant mortality by 2 percent and postneonatal mortality by 4 percent.⁵⁴ One mechanism for improving health is that with paid time off, it's easier for parents to take their babies to get immunizations and other postnatal care.⁵⁵ In Japan, for instance, children of mothers who took parental leave are much more likely to be up to date on vaccinations at thirty-six months than children of other mothers who returned to work but did not take leave.⁵⁶

A second mechanism is that women who can take time off from work are more likely to begin and continue breastfeeding, which studies have shown to be one of the most powerful infant health interventions. Specifically, breastfeeding is associated with lower rates of respiratory diseases, diarrhea, and malnutrition—all leading causes of death of young children. A study focused on the United States found that expanding breastfeeding could prevent as many as 720 postneonatal deaths annually.⁵⁷ Moreover, breastfeeding has marked benefits for women's health: women who breastfeed have lower rates of breast cancer later in life, with some research also suggesting reduced risks of ovarian cancer, heart disease, and osteoporosis.⁵⁸ Breastfeeding also makes it easier to space out births, reducing rates of maternal mortality and morbidity.⁵⁹

While many women want to breastfeed longer, returning to work is one of the primary reasons for weaning, especially for mothers without pumping and milk storage options at their workplace. Because of this, extending paid leave can make a powerful difference. For example, in Canada, the expansion of paid maternity and parental leave in 2001, which doubled households' total allotment from twenty-five to fifty weeks, increased the share of women exclusively breastfeeding for six months by nearly 40 percent compared to prior to the reform. Additionally, the expansion decreased the proportion of women who reported that they stopped breastfeeding due to work by nearly half.⁶⁰

Historically, however, rigorous evidence on whether paid leave laws have similar effects in lower-income countries has been lacking. This is true even though the potential impact has been known to be large. Because of working conditions and other barriers, just 44 percent of infants worldwide are exclusively breastfed

for the first six months, as recommended by the World Health Organization.⁶¹ According to a 2016 study in *The Lancet*, achieving exclusive breastfeeding for all babies under six months could reduce deaths of children under five globally by around 823,000 per year.⁶²

Over the past decade, together with colleagues, researchers at our center have undertaken a series of quasi-experimental studies to understand whether policies such as paid maternal leave make a difference for infant health across countries at all income levels. The type of globally comparative policy data included in this book has been essential to making these studies possible; by measuring how changes in laws drive changes in outcomes across countries over time, while controlling for other factors that can influence outcomes, we can rigorously evaluate policy impacts across diverse settings, finding common solutions for major challenges that affect low- and high-resource countries alike. Identifying “what works” to strengthen health and economic outcomes not just in high-income countries but globally is central to our collective commitments to realize the Sustainable Development Goals and improve conditions for all.

One of our first studies to take this approach focused on infant mortality. Though paid maternity leave had previously been found to reduce mortality rates across the OECD, there were valid reasons to question whether it would have the same effects in lower-income countries, where a greater share of women are in the informal economy and fewer resources may be available for policy implementation. Using a sample of twenty LMICs, we merged longitudinal policy data on changes in the duration of paid maternity leave in each country between 2000 and 2007 with data on 300,000 live births that took place within the same period, collected through the Demographic and Health Surveys. We found that for each one-month increase in paid maternity leave, infant deaths dropped by 13 percent, controlling for a wide range of other factors, including GDP per capita, female labor force participation, per capita total health expenditure, and per capita government health expenditure. Notably, the reductions in infant deaths were concentrated in the postneonatal period (twenty-eight days to one year of age), when the expanded leave policies would have had the greatest effects on mothers’ ability to provide care.⁶³ These findings made clear that maternity leave could have powerful positive impacts on infant health across widely varying economies.

We applied similar methods to understand the particular mechanisms by which paid leave improves infant health in LMICs, with separate studies focused on immunization rates, breastfeeding, and nutrition. For example, in a collaborative study of twenty LMICs, we found that extending paid maternity leave increased the likelihood that a child would receive all three doses of the diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccine, which are typically administered at

clinics every four weeks beginning at six weeks of age.⁶⁴ Interestingly, the study did not find that longer maternity leave influenced the polio vaccine, which is often available through clinics and at other settings beyond work hours since it has been the target of national campaigns. These findings suggest that the reason maternity leave is associated with higher vaccination rates is that parents are able to take their infants to the clinic to get their shots without missing work. Given that twenty-three million children under the age of one are missing basic, life-saving vaccinations, this study underscores the critical importance of paid leave for improving health outcomes and creating the foundation for equal opportunity worldwide.⁶⁵

Similarly, a study of thirty-eight LMICs led by a doctoral student at our center demonstrated that each additional month of paid maternity leave was associated with a nearly 6 percentage-point increase in exclusive breastfeeding.⁶⁶ This may help explain the impacts on infant nutrition: a follow-up study led by the same researcher, focused on forty LMICs, found that each one-month extension of paid maternity leave reduced the incidence of bloody diarrhea in children under five by 36 percent, again controlling for factors like GDP, government health expenditures, and female labor force participation and unemployment rates.⁶⁷ As noted earlier, breastfeeding is associated with significantly lower rates of diarrheal disease throughout childhood.

Evidence from across countries shows that fathers' nurturing engagement with their children—which is facilitated by paid leave—can have significant benefits for their emotional and cognitive development.⁶⁸ Moreover, some research has demonstrated that leave for fathers can make a difference in breastfeeding, as having support from a partner can support new mothers in establishing and continuing breastfeeding. In Sweden, a study involving fathers of over 50,000 infants found that those infants whose fathers took parental leave during their first year of life were significantly more likely to be breastfeeding at both two and six months.⁶⁹ In LMICs, paid paternity and parental leave may have similar effects if they were extended, but the very short duration of current paternity leave policies makes it infeasible to use quasi-experimental approaches to study the impact of multi-month paternity leave in low-income settings.

Paid leave for both parents has been associated with improvements in mothers' mental health,⁷⁰ with cross-cutting benefits for children's care and women's ability to return to work. For example, in Sweden, a policy change that increased the number of parental leave days that fathers and mothers could take concurrently, from ten days to forty, reduced mothers' anxiety as well as risks of postpartum physical complications.⁷¹ Impacts can also be long-lasting: a longitudinal study of eight European countries found that more generous maternity leave at the time of a woman's first birth reduced her likelihood of depression later in life.⁷²

PAID PARENTAL LEAVE: EFFECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE POLICY DESIGN AND WHERE THE WORLD STANDS

Countries take a variety of different approaches to providing paid leave for new parents, as already noted. In order to make data comparable across countries, in our analysis, we use the following categories to describe paid leave: (1) *leave reserved for mothers* before or after the birth or adoption of a baby; (2) *leave reserved for fathers or partners*, which encompasses leave for fathers of infants and leave reserved for the birth mother's spouse or partner; and (3) *shared parental leave*, which is leave that is available jointly to either parent to provide extended periods of care up to the age of three.

As of January 2022, the vast majority of the world's countries provided some amount of paid leave reserved for mothers and/or shared parental leave. Only seven countries—the United States, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga—have yet to adopt a nationwide paid leave policy. In contrast, more than a third of the world's countries (37 percent) fail to ensure men have any access to paid leave.

Countries also vary markedly when it comes to the duration of paid leave available to women. Sixty-two percent of countries provide at least fourteen weeks, the minimum standard established by the ILO. In contrast, just 23 percent of countries ensure men have access to at least fourteen weeks of paid leave.

Twenty-eight percent of countries provide at least six months to women, which facilitates the six months of exclusive breastfeeding recommended by the World Health Organization.⁷³ High-income countries are much more likely than low- or middle-income countries to ensure access to lengthier paid leave. Yet the total amount of leave is only part of the story. Women's economic opportunities are shaped by the details of these policies.

Paid Leave Reserved for Mothers before and after Birth. Globally, the most common form of paid leave is leave reserved for mothers who have given birth. This leave enables women to physically recover from childbirth. Nearly all countries (94 percent) also allow or even require women to take paid leave before birth, which can support maternal and infant health during complex pregnancies. Sixty-two percent of countries reserve at least fourteen weeks of paid leave for birth mothers. In 15 percent of countries, six months of paid leave is reserved for birth mothers. The extent to which these policies advance women's economic opportunities depends on whether a similar amount of leave is reserved for men.

Paid Leave Reserved for Fathers or Partners and Paid Leave for Either Parent. In contrast to leave for mothers, just 56 percent of countries reserve paid leave for fathers or partners. Further, the leave reserved for fathers or partners is commonly

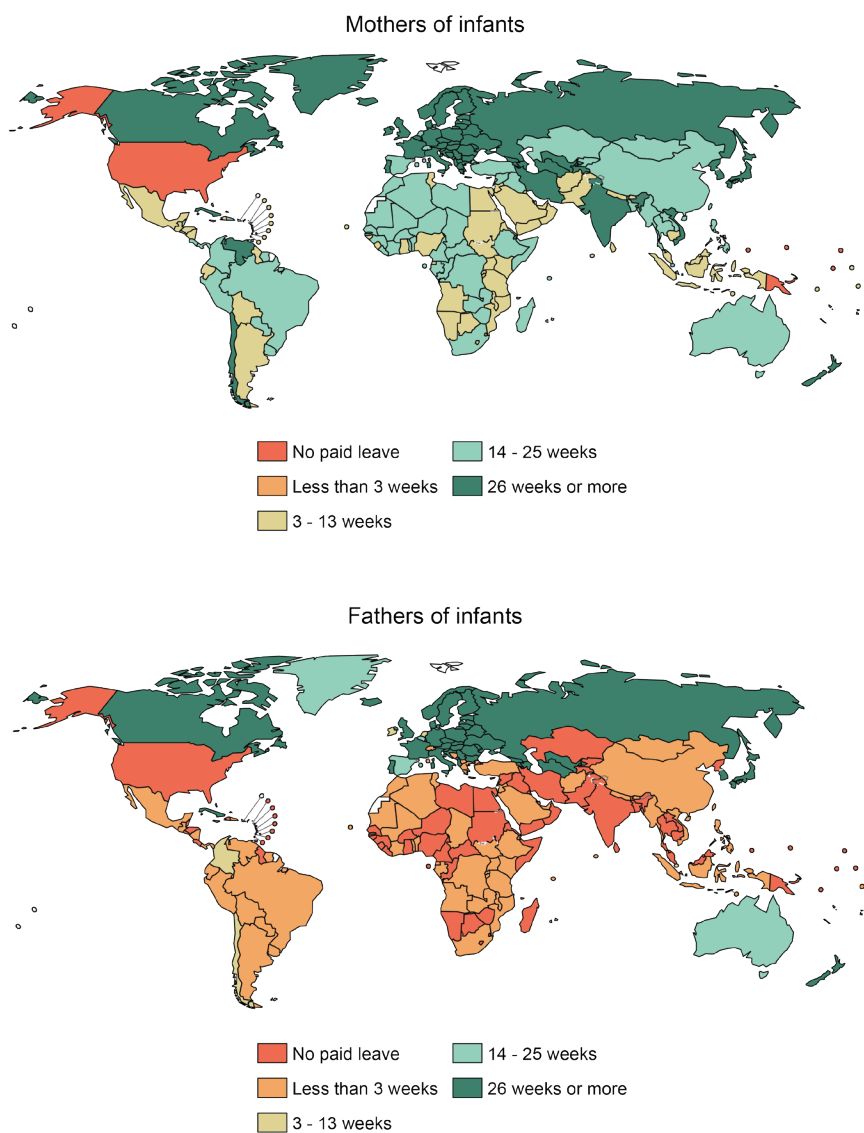


FIGURE 15. Is paid leave available to parents of infants?

of a far shorter duration. In 46 percent of countries, less than three weeks of paid leave is reserved. Only 7 percent of countries reserve at least fourteen weeks of paid leave for fathers or partners, and an additional 3 percent provide more leave or a higher wage replacement rate when both parents take shared parental leave.

In 16 percent of countries, shared parental leave is available for either parent to take. The vast majority of these leaves are lengthy: fifty-two weeks or more. Yet without incentives to shift behavior, women predominantly take these leaves. Nine percent of countries enable birth mothers to transfer a portion of their leave to the father. While this provides an approach for enabling men to take paid leave, the default assignment of leave to the mother may reinforce gendered norms about who should be taking paid leave. Likewise, three countries allow fathers to transfer some or all of their individual entitlement to the mother or have a shareable cap on using individual entitlements, which may undermine attempts to encourage fathers to take paid leave in the context of restrictive gender norms.

Affordability of Paid Leave. Countries also vary significantly when it comes to the wage replacement rate. Ensuring that parental leave is adequately paid is critical for helping families meet expenses at a time when household costs inevitably increase and can significantly affect whether workers can afford to take the full duration of leave available.⁷⁴ In the United States, for instance, which provides solely unpaid leave, one study found that the birth of a baby preceded a quarter of “poverty spells,” or periods of at least two months below the poverty line.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, even across the OECD, which overwhelmingly comprises high-income countries that do provide paid leave, we found that around 90 percent of minimum wage workers—a group in which women are overrepresented—would see their pay fall below the poverty line while taking paid leave due to wage replacement rates that are too low or not progressively structured.⁷⁶

For paid leave reserved for mothers, 75 percent of countries with paid leave have a wage replacement rate of 80 percent of wages or more for workers with one year of tenure,^a helping protect families against poverty and making it more likely that women across socioeconomic statuses can afford to take leave. An additional 9 percent of countries provide a wage replacement rate of at least two-thirds of women’s regular pay, meeting the ILO standard. Paid leave reserved for fathers is slightly more likely than paid leave for mothers to be compensated at a high rate. Eighty-three percent of countries with paid leave reserved for fathers guarantee a wage replacement rate of 80 percent of wages or more. In contrast, of the countries that have shared parental leave, only 24 percent guarantee at least 80 percent of wages. More than a third of these countries provide a flat rate or adjusted flat rate

a. Throughout this section, these wage replacement rates are the lowest amount of income replacement. In some countries, a higher level of wage replacement is available based on the parent’s employment history, income level, or duration of leave. One country does not provide maternity leave to workers with one year of tenure: Zambia requires two years.

payment that is not tied to previous earnings. An additional third of countries provide only 20 percent to 65 percent of wages as a minimum payment.

Supporting Return to Work: Job Protection during Leave and Breastfeeding Breaks. Of countries reserving paid leave for mothers, the majority (93 percent) guarantee a woman taking leave will have the same or a similar job back on her return to work, prohibit discriminatory dismissal while on leave, or prohibit the dismissal of mothers of young children. Similarly, 90 percent of countries that provide shared parental leave ensure job protection while on leave. Explicit job protection is less common (only 44 percent) for leave reserved for fathers or partners. While this leave is often substantially shorter than maternity or gender-neutral parental leave, given the pressures men report from employers to forgo leave, job protection and antiretaliation measures are important to ensure men can take full parental leaves.

Another aspect of enabling women to return to work after the birth of a child is supporting their ability to continue breastfeeding. Globally, 72 percent of countries guarantee that women who have returned to work can take paid breaks for nursing or pumping during the work day until their child is at least six months old. An additional 2 percent of countries provide unpaid breaks for this purpose.

Parental Leave: Covering All Families

While providing leave to both mothers and fathers after the birth of a child is a strong start, specific choices countries make about the structure of their leave policies can affect whether these policies are fully and equally accessible to all types of families. In particular, countries vary with respect to their coverage of same-sex couples, single parents, and adoptive parents. Designing policies to provide full benefits to all families is critical for gender equality and for providing a foundation for healthy development for all children.

Single Parents. Despite the multitude of different family structures globally, parental leave policies still typically rest on the assumption that a household includes a married couple consisting of one man and one woman. Across the OECD, around 7 percent of households are single-parent households, and households headed by a single mother account for the substantial majority of these in nearly every country.⁷⁷ Although women who are single mothers tend to have higher labor force participation rates than other mothers, they also face higher risks of poverty and financial stress. Notably, paid leave can help: across high-income countries, one study found that each additional week of paid leave reduced the risk of poverty for single mothers by 4 percent.⁷⁸

Yet one country, Brunei, provides single mothers with less paid leave than married mothers. In contrast, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Swaziland have affirmative provisions that guarantee the same level of paid leave to women regardless of their marital status.

In other countries, while the duration of leave for mothers does not explicitly depend on a mother's marital status, the structure of paid parental leave may disadvantage single-parent households. One way countries can support single-parent families is to ensure that single parents can take the full leave that would otherwise be available to a couple. Using 2016 data, we found that in twenty-two of the thirty-three OECD countries with paid parental leave, single mothers were eligible for a shorter amount of total paid leave than two-parent households.⁷⁹ Even more countries disadvantaged single fathers compared to two-parent families.

Differences in leave availability for single parents compared to two-parent households arise when leave is reserved for each of two parents or there are incentives to encourage men's take-up, but there are no provisions in place to account for single parents. Countries take a range of approaches to proactively address these disparities. Some countries with individual entitlements to paid leave, such as Sweden, enable single parents to take the full allocation of leave for both parents. Germany has explicit measures enabling single parents to take the bonus months of paid leave that are normally available to families only if both parents take parental leave. Some countries also address payment level. In Belgium, the parental leave benefits are paid at a level around a third higher for single parents than for married parents.

Beyond leave, however, it's critical for all parents to have access to affordable childcare. As noted earlier in this chapter, particularly long leaves can have negative consequences for women's careers. Ensuring single-parent families have access to equivalent leave as two-parent households is important for equality and children's well-being, but ensuring childcare and other supports are in place to enable single mothers to return to work within six to nine months is likewise important for their long-term economic outcomes.

Adoptive Parents. Because of the presumption by some legislators historically that leave serves primarily to enable women to recover from childbirth, adoptive parents are ineligible for paid leave in some countries, or have access only to a reduced amount of leave. For example, in 2016, among the thirty-three OECD countries that provide paid leave, six provided birth parents with at least twelve more weeks of leave than adoptive parents. Globally, 53 percent of countries provide paid leave for families after the birth of the child but do not provide any paid leave after the adoption of a child. This disparity deprives adoptive families of the full benefits of parental leave, including its positive effects on children's healthy development and its potential to support both parents' opportunities at work and their engagement at home. However, among those countries that do provide paid leave for adoptive families, many provide adoptive families with similar amounts of leave as birth families when excluding the duration of leave that pregnant women are able to take before birth.

In some countries, adoption leave also reinforces gender stereotypes in caregiving. While paid leave before and after birth can help support women's health around the pregnancy, as well as enable time to establish breastfeeding that supports infant health, there are no such biological justifications for differences in leave availability for adoptive mothers compared to adoptive fathers. Yet in fifteen countries globally, only women can take paid adoption leave, and an additional seven countries provide less leave to adoptive fathers than to adoptive mothers.^b For example, Peru's law granting leave for adoption states that "if the petitioner's adoption workers are spouses, the license will be taken by the woman."

Same-Sex Couples. For same-sex couples, the biggest barrier in parental leave is a lack of legal recognition and, in many countries, legalized persecution. According to data from the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association, only 14 percent of countries legally allow joint adoption by same-sex couples, and only 15 percent legally allow same-sex couples to be married. Moreover, in more than a third of countries, laws criminalizing same-sex sexual activity persist, making it difficult for same-sex couples to be openly engaged parents.⁸⁰

Even among countries that have generally been leaders in expanding rights for same-sex couples, disparities persist in the amount of paid leave that same-sex couples can access compared to heterosexual couples. For example, in 2016, we found that in fourteen of the thirty-three OECD countries that provide paid parental leave, same-sex female couples received less total leave than heterosexual couples due to gender-restrictive language on who could access leave reserved for fathers or some shared parental leave.⁸¹ Encouragingly, these disparities are declining. Among the twenty-eight countries that had made same-sex marriage legal as of 2020, only six provided less leave to same-sex female couples than to heterosexual couples.^c But there is still far more that needs to be done to reach equality, including: (1) ensuring equal amounts of leave are available to each parent, and (2) using gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language in leave policies.⁸² One goal of using gender-specific language has been to increase men's take-up of leave in different-sex couples. Gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language paired with individual, nontransferable entitlements to leave could achieve the same objective, without inadvertently reducing the leave available to same-sex couples. For example, Iceland amended its parental leave policy in 2006 to guarantee paid leave to each "parent," with no mention of sex, "in order not to discriminate on the basis of gender or sexual orientations."⁸³ Similarly, Sweden provides leave to a "parent" as well as a parent's "spouse" or "partner." Both countries have reported substantial take-up of leave by men.

b. Three countries (Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, and Hungary) allow adoptive mothers to have access to higher-paid leave, while adoptive fathers can access only lower-paid leave.

c. The United States has legalized same-sex marriage but does not provide paid parental leave.

Grandparent and Extended Family Caregivers. In some households, grandparents or other extended family members are the primary caregivers for children. A study based in West Bengal, India, for example, found that grandparents were the primary caregivers of the youngest child in 5 percent of families,⁸⁴ while grandparents comprise more than 3 percent of primary caregivers for infants in low-income families in South Korea.⁸⁵ Parents can be unavailable to provide care for a range of reasons. When leave is available only to parents, other family caregivers receive no support, disadvantaging the children in their care. Nine percent of countries have taken explicit steps to support alternative caregivers, such as grandparents, in taking shared parental leave. For example, Armenia allows the “mother (step-mother), father (the step-father), grandmother, grandfather of the family or any other relatives” to take parental leave before the child turns three and enables caregivers to take turns using this leave. However, in some countries, this right is limited to when parents have died or been deprived of their parental rights due to incapacity or incarceration.

Parental Leave: Covering All Workers

Finally, even if paid leave covers both parents and all family structures, its effects will be limited if it doesn’t cover parents in the informal economy, where a majority of people in many countries work. According to the ILO, 58 percent of the female workforce and 63 percent of the male workforce—or two billion people globally—work in informal jobs.⁸⁶ Too often, across low- and high-income countries alike, domestic workers, agricultural workers, and those in the gig economy, among others, have no access to paid parental leave even when a national policy is in place. Likewise, part-time workers, who are disproportionately women in many countries, often lack access to protections.

This gap in coverage is not inevitable. A range of countries have shown it’s feasible to provide leave to informal, part-time, and self-employed workers. Indeed, around the world, more than a third of countries explicitly guarantee paid maternal leave to domestic workers, as do a quarter for agricultural workers. For example, Fiji’s 2007 Employment Regulations define a worker as “a person who is employed under a contract of service, and includes an apprentice, learner, domestic worker, part-time worker or casual worker,” guaranteeing these workers the same labor rights, including paid maternity leave, as other workers. Likewise, more than half of countries cover the self-employed, generally by structuring their paid parental leave programs as social insurance—which could include Uber drivers and others in the gig economy. Finally, more than a third of countries explicitly cover part-time workers without a minimum number of hours or those working less than a quarter of full-time hours, and only 2 percent require workers to be working at least half-time to be eligible. No country explicitly excludes all part-time workers.

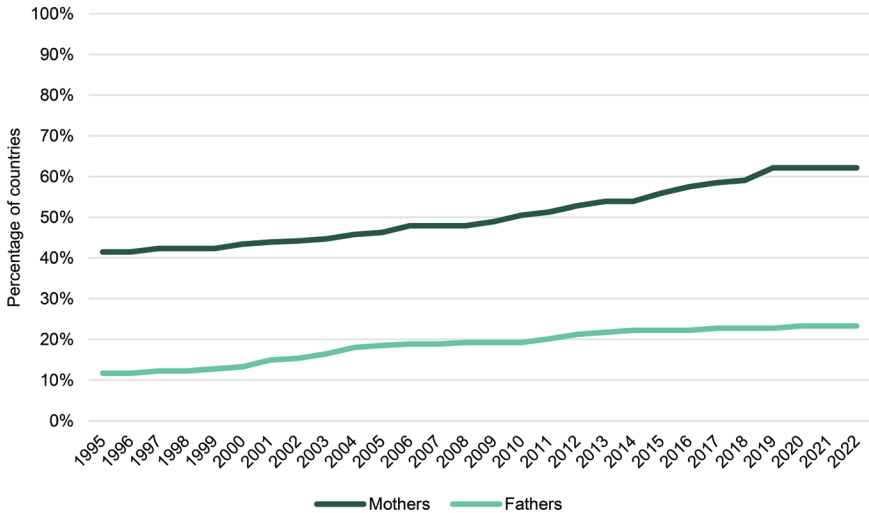


FIGURE 16. Are more countries guaranteeing at least 14 weeks of paid leave to mothers and fathers of infants?

Progress in Leave Policies Over Time: Unequal for Too Long

The past several decades have witnessed a growing recognition of the importance of paid leave for fathers. Our analysis found that 63 percent of countries provided paid paternal leave in 2022, compared to only 24 percent in 1995. However, in far too many countries, the leave length remains grossly unequal: 74 percent of countries provide no paid leave or less than three weeks of paid leave to fathers, compared to only 4 percent for mothers.

Moreover, only a small minority of countries have adopted policies to incentivize men's take-up of leave. In the meantime, the gender gaps in leave-taking remain stark, undermining the potential of paid parental leave to increase women's opportunities in the economy and men's engagement at home. Further, ongoing work is needed to ensure parental leave policies are inclusive of all workers and family types.

Finally, across countries, more attention is needed for successful implementation among groups typically left out. For example, in California, nearly a decade after the initial introduction of paid family leave, fewer than half of respondents to a 2011 survey reported that they were aware of the policy, and a more recent survey suggests awareness has dropped even further, to just 36 percent.⁸⁷ Notably, awareness is lowest among low-wage workers, for whom the policy could be particularly impactful. Similarly, although Namibia includes domestic workers in its paid maternity leave policy and makes leave available to the self-employed, only 57 percent of eligible workers are registered for the program, meaning that

43 percent—primarily in the informal economy—“continue to be excluded from such protection due to a lack of awareness and enforcement.”⁸⁸ To ensure leave policies reach everyone who is eligible, effective outreach is essential.

BEYOND PARENTAL LEAVE: THE CRITICAL
IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY AND AFFORDABLE
CHILDCARE, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION,
AND LEAVE FOR CHILDREN’S HEALTH NEEDS

Paid parental leave is only the first step. Universal availability of quality, affordable childcare and preschools is likewise essential for gender equality across low- and high-income countries alike. Indeed, evidence from a range of settings has shown that increasing the availability and affordability of childcare supports women’s earnings and labor force participation. For example, after subsidized childcare was introduced in Quebec, the share of mothers in paid employment in two-parent families jumped by 21 percent from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.⁸⁹ Similarly, after free preschool was expanded throughout Argentina between 1994 and 2000, the chances of maternal employment went up by 11–14 percent.⁹⁰ Impacts have also been identified in lower-income settings: a study of rural Mozambique found that the construction of preschools increased the likelihood of employment by young children’s caregivers by 26 percent.⁹¹

Moreover, the provision of early childhood education can increase the likelihood that older girls attend school rather than stay home to care for their younger siblings while their parents work. Research has shown that having a young sibling correlates with missing school: according to an early study, in Brazil and Mexico, single-parent families with a preschool-aged child were three times as likely to have at least one child ages six to fourteen who was not enrolled in school, compared to families without a preschool-aged child.⁹² Mozambique provides an example of a country where expanding pre-primary education had benefits for older girls: following the launch of the new preschool program, school attendance rates of preschoolers’ older siblings increased by 6 percent.⁹³ In this way, childcare and pre-primary education both have immediate effects for women’s work and lay the foundation for the next generation’s economic opportunities.

Currently, however, early childhood care and education is often unavailable or unaffordable. For example, in 2016 alone, nearly two million parents in the United States quit a job, were unable to take a job, or had to substantially change their job due to inaccessible childcare.⁹⁴ According to one UK survey, two-thirds of mothers report that the costs of childcare are a barrier to working generally or working more hours.⁹⁵ Across the OECD, a typical couple earning two-thirds of the average wage spends 10 percent of their net income on childcare; in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic, the costs are nearly 30 percent.⁹⁶ Moreover, in a survey of employed mothers with children under six years old in thirty-one LMICs, 39 percent said they cared for their children themselves while

they worked; just 4 percent used an organized day care or nursery.⁹⁷ And as with paid leave, women in the informal economy face among the greatest exclusion from available services, with consequences for entire families. A study based on interviews with 159 female informal workers in Brazil, Ghana, India, South Africa, and Thailand found that women without access to childcare experienced regular losses of jobs, earnings, and persisting concerns about their children's safety, development, and access to educational opportunities.⁹⁸

In this way, the privatization of care and tendency to treat it as an individual responsibility rather than a collective need and social good widens both gender and socioeconomic inequalities. Those households with the lowest incomes are the least likely to be able to afford unsubsidized care, increasing the likelihood that the mothers in those families will either leave the workforce, heightening their households' poverty risks, or feel compelled to bring their children with them to work, despite risks to children's safety and to women's income and well-being.

In contrast, expanding access to early childhood education (ECE) is a win-win-win: it benefits young children during a crucial period of their development, increasing the probability they will succeed in school; allows older children—particularly girls—to stay in school longer; and enables parents—particularly mothers—to stay in the workforce. To ensure childcare and ECE are accessible to all, public provision and limiting costs to parents are crucial. In Spain, for example, the public provision of full-time childcare resulted in a nearly 10 percent increase in employment of mothers of three-year-olds, even during a period of low labor demand.⁹⁹ When the only decent quality options are private centers that charge a substantial tuition, or when insufficient spots are available, low-income families will be disproportionately affected.

At the same time, from the perspective of gender equality in the economy, ensuring that childcare and ECE workers receive an adequate wage is essential, since these workers are disproportionately female. Too often, this issue is framed as a false choice: either childcare and ECE can be affordable, or childcare workers and preschool teachers can be adequately compensated. However, through adequate public investment, both are easily achievable, and the long-term economic benefits—including higher labor force participation by women and improved health and education outcomes for children—far outweigh the costs. Germany provides one example: its 2013 adoption of universal, publicly subsidized childcare beginning at age one increased the labor supply of mothers by nearly 5 percentage points.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, early childhood teachers are covered by a collective bargaining agreement and as of 2019/2020, earned a starting salary of 51,695 Euros (~US\$56,288).¹⁰¹ Moreover, the implementation of universal childcare has created hundreds of thousands of new quality jobs, with employment in nurseries growing by 54 percent between 2008 and 2018.¹⁰² These impacts align with a range of recent global and country-level analyses, which consistently find that investing in care could result in massive job creation, with disproportionate impacts on women's employment but also substantial gains for men.¹⁰³

Where the World Stands: Childcare and Pre-Primary Education

As of 2019, just 41 percent of 189 economies provide any direct support to families that could be used to meet childcare expenses, according to the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law project.¹⁰⁴ These supports can include childcare and family allowances as well as tax credits and deductions for number of children and childcare expenses. Thirty-five percent of economies provide support to childcare centers, and just 24 percent subsidize childcare costs for employers. Moreover, the World Bank's numbers likely overestimate coverage for some of the most vulnerable women, as they are based on which policies are in place in each country's major business center. More specifically, the analysis covers what a married woman working as a cashier at a store with more than sixty employees would receive. Even when a woman working in a formal economy job at a midsize or large employer in the top business center may have access to these supports, those in rural areas or smaller cities or towns, in the informal economy, or working for a smaller employer may receive far less.

In twenty-six economies, private-sector employers have a legal obligation to provide or support access to childcare. However, in eighteen of these economies, the requirement to provide childcare is based on a minimum number of female employees, which may discourage employers from hiring women. In Panama, for instance, a workplace needs to offer childcare only if it employs twenty or more women; in Turkey, employers are exempt from the requirement unless they have at least 150 female employees. In contrast, five economies base employers' obligations to provide childcare on the total number of employees, regardless of gender, while Afghanistan, Japan, and the Netherlands require that employers subsidize childcare regardless of their size.

According to a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, over a third of the world's countries guarantee at least one year of free pre-primary education, while some countries provide several years.¹⁰⁵ These policies can make a difference years into the future. In a study with colleagues, we merged policy data on the availability of free and compulsory pre-primary education in 104 countries with UNESCO's data on primary school completion rates, with the goal of measuring whether policies that improved access to pre-primary school helped more children finish primary school. Further, to understand whether these policies were effective in the countries with the most room for improvement, we looked separately at the impacts in countries with low primary school completion rates and in those with average completion rates. Controlling for national income and level of urbanization, we found that making pre-primary education both free and compulsory was associated with a nearly 10 percentage-point increase in primary school completion rates for countries with average completion rates. For countries with lower completion rates, the effects were even larger, reflecting a 12-point increase.¹⁰⁶ Notably, having both provisions in place mattered; no statistically significant association was found if pre-primary was free, but not compulsory.

Leave for Child Health Needs

Even after the transition to school, children's health needs continue. Due to the persistence of gendered norms around care, women are also often the primary caregivers for children experiencing short-term or routine illnesses. Aside from providing care while a child recovers at home, women are also often responsible for taking the child to the doctor for treatment or preventive care. In Denmark, for instance, a study found that mothers rather than fathers handled over 90 percent of all children's medical appointments.¹⁰⁷ As a result, increasing the availability of leave to meet these needs and encouraging more gender-equal uptake are both critical.

Young children in particular experience frequent illnesses as their immune systems are developing. Pediatricians estimate that the average child under age two may get between eight to ten colds per year,¹⁰⁸ while children starting preschool or kindergarten often experience an increase in infections as they're exposed to other students. School-age children likewise regularly miss school due to the flu, gastroenteritis, or other common illnesses, which may vary by context.¹⁰⁹ In over eighty countries, for instance, malaria remains endemic, with 229 million cases reported in 2019; one study from Mali found that malaria was the leading cause of absenteeism from primary school.¹¹⁰

Beyond its benefits for gender equality, ensuring that parents can take leave to meet the health needs of their children has demonstrated benefits for health. Children whose parents have access to leave that they can use to meet their child's health needs are more likely to access preventive care, such as immunizations, while children who have been ill or injured recover more quickly when they are cared for by a parent.¹¹¹

Around the world, only 37 percent of countries take some approach to providing paid leave for men and women to meet children's everyday health needs. An additional 11 percent of countries guarantee unpaid leave that can be used to meet children's everyday health needs.

In many countries, even when paid leave is available, it may not be sufficient to meet the health needs of all children. Evidence about recovery time from common conditions provides some insights into the duration of leave that might be required for health needs. For example, illness caused by influenza typically lasts around nine to twelve days, with some more serious cases requiring hospitalization.¹¹² However, only a quarter of countries guarantee at least two weeks of paid leave to meet a five-year-old child's everyday health needs, such as by attending preventive doctor's appointments and caring for children during routine illnesses.

Moreover, in some countries, paid leave is available only to care for younger children. Whereas 37 percent of countries guarantee paid leave that can be used to meet a two-year-old's everyday health needs, only 28 percent do so for fifteen-year-olds. While a fifteen-year-old may be able to be left home unsupervised, parental presence is still often needed for medical appointments and to provide care. While the majority of countries provide parents with individual entitlements to paid leave, five countries have measures to ensure single parents have additional leave to compensate for only having one caregiver available.

In the majority of countries that provide leave for children's health needs, it's equally available regardless of gender. Still, hardly any countries incentivize gender equality in leave-taking. Moreover, three countries—Dominican Republic, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique—reinforce gendered norms around caregiving by making paid or unpaid leave for children's everyday health needs available only for mothers. Finally, four countries make paid leave a family entitlement instead of an individual entitlement, which may decrease the likelihood that both parents take leave.

In the vast majority of countries providing paid leave that can be used to meet children's health needs, payments are at full or nearly full (80-percent) replacement of wages. However, 10 percent of countries globally set minimum payments below this level. As with parental leave, these choices make a difference for gender equality in leave-taking, given how they interact with gender pay gaps. In Sweden, for example, parents are more likely to share leave to care for a sick child equitably when the female partner earns more than the male partner.¹¹³

TABLE 5 Legal approaches to paid leave during early childhood, by country income level

	Low-income countries	Middle-income countries	High-income countries
<i>How much paid leave is available to mothers of infants?</i>			
No paid leave	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	3 (5%)
Less than 14 weeks	12 (44%)	43 (40%)	11 (19%)
14–25.9 weeks	13 (48%)	38 (35%)	14 (24%)
26–51.9 weeks	2 (7%)	7 (6%)	13 (22%)
52 weeks or more	0 (0%)	16 (15%)	17 (29%)
<i>How much paid leave is available to fathers of infants?</i>			
No paid leave	13 (48%)	45 (42%)	13 (22%)
Less than 3 weeks	14 (52%)	47 (44%)	10 (17%)
3–13.9 weeks	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	5 (9%)
14–25.9 weeks	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (7%)
26 weeks or more	0 (0%)	15 (14%)	26 (45%)
<i>How much paid leave is reserved for mothers of infants?</i>			
No paid leave	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	3 (5%)
Less than 14 weeks	12 (44%)	43 (40%)	11 (19%)
14–25.9 weeks	13 (48%)	50 (46%)	28 (48%)
26–51.9 weeks	2 (7%)	6 (6%)	14 (24%)
52 weeks or more	0 (0%)	5 (5%)	2 (3%)
<i>How much paid leave is reserved for fathers of infants?</i>			
No paid leave	13 (48%)	53 (50%)	18 (31%)
Less than 3 weeks	14 (52%)	54 (50%)	20 (34%)

TABLE 5 (continued)

	Low-income countries	Middle-income countries	High-income countries
3–13.9 weeks	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (12%)
14–25.9 weeks	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (10%)
26 weeks or more	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (12%)
<i>How much shared parental leave is available?</i>			
No paid leave	27 (100%)	95 (88%)	41 (71%)
Less than 14 weeks	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (2%)
14–25.9 weeks	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)
26–51.9 weeks	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	5 (9%)
52 weeks or more	0 (0%)	9 (8%)	9 (16%)
<i>What is the lowest wage replacement rate of paid leave reserved for mothers with one year of tenure?</i>			
No paid leave	0 (0%)	5 (5%)	3 (5%)
Flat rate or adjusted flat rate	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	8 (14%)
20%–65%	3 (11%)	11 (10%)	5 (9%)
66%–79%	0 (0%)	11 (10%)	6 (10%)
80%–100%	24 (89%)	80 (74%)	36 (62%)
<i>What is the lowest wage replacement rate of paid leave reserved for fathers with one year of tenure?</i>			
No paid leave	13 (48%)	53 (49%)	18 (31%)
Flat rate or adjusted flat rate	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (12%)
20%–65%	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	2 (3%)
66%–79%	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	6 (10%)
80%–100%	14 (52%)	52 (48%)	25 (43%)
<i>What is the lowest wage replacement rate of shared paid parental leave for parents with one year of tenure?</i>			
No paid leave	27 (100%)	95 (88%)	41 (72%)
Flat rate or adjusted flat rate	0 (0%)	6 (6%)	5 (9%)
20%–65%	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	7 (12%)
66%–79%	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
80%–100%	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	3 (5%)
<i>Is job protection guaranteed throughout paid leave reserved for mothers?</i>			
No paid maternity leave	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	3 (5%)
No explicit job protection	4 (15%)	7 (6%)	2 (3%)
Job protection only guaranteed for a portion of leave	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Job protection guaranteed throughout	23 (85%)	97 (90%)	53 (91%)
<i>Is job protection guaranteed throughout paid leave reserved for fathers?</i>			
No paid paternity leave	13 (48%)	53 (50%)	18 (31%)

(contd.)

TABLE 5 (continued)

	Low-income countries	Middle-income countries	High-income countries
No explicit job protection	9 (33%)	36 (34%)	16 (28%)
Job protection only guaranteed for a portion of leave	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Job protection guaranteed throughout	5 (19%)	18 (17%)	24 (41%)
<i>Is job protection guaranteed throughout shared paid parental leave?</i>			
No paid parental leave	27 (100%)	95 (88%)	41 (71%)
No explicit job protection	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
Job protection only guaranteed for a portion of leave	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Job protection guaranteed throughout	0 (0%)	11 (10%)	16 (28%)
<i>Are mothers of infants guaranteed breastfeeding breaks at work?</i>			
Not guaranteed	7 (27%)	23 (21%)	18 (31%)
Yes, until child is 1–5.9 months old	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
Yes, at least 6 months unpaid	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (5%)
Yes, at least 6 months paid	19 (73%)	83 (77%)	37 (64%)
<i>Do adoptive families have access to as much paid parental leave as birth families?</i>			
No paid parental leave	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	3 (5%)
No paid leave for adoptive families	27 (100%)	61 (56%)	15 (26%)
Adoptive families have less leave than birth families	0 (0%)	22 (20%)	15 (26%)
Equal duration of leave for adoptive families	0 (0%)	21 (19%)	25 (43%)
<i>Is there gender equality in the duration of paid leave for adoption?</i>			
No paid leave for adoption	27 (100%)	65 (60%)	18 (31%)
Only women can take paid leave for adoption in two parent families	0 (0%)	13 (12%)	2 (3%)
Men can take paid adoption leave, but for a shorter period than women	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	3 (5%)
Gender equality in duration of paid adoption leave	0 (0%)	26 (24%)	35 (60%)
<i>Are working parents guaranteed leave that can be used for their children's everyday health needs?</i>			
No, no leave	17 (63%)	63 (58%)	17 (29%)
Leave only available to mothers	2 (7%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Unpaid leave only for parents	0 (0%)	8 (7%)	14 (24%)
Yes, paid leave for parents	8 (30%)	36 (33%)	27 (47%)
<i>What is the lowest wage replacement rate of paid leave available for children's everyday health needs?</i>			
No paid leave	19 (70%)	72 (67%)	31 (53%)
25%–59%	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	3 (5%)
60%–79%	0 (0%)	8 (7%)	7 (12%)
80%–100%	8 (30%)	27 (25%)	17 (29%)

CONCLUSION

Children's health and well-being are essential to every society's survival. Children's ability to reach their greatest potential dramatically shapes a country's future and directly affects the health and economic outcomes of the generations to come. Ensuring that all children have access to the care, nutrition, and early educational opportunities they need to grow and thrive is consequently a shared and collective responsibility of societies, which yields shared and collective benefits.

Yet contemporary discourse often frames child-rearing as solely the responsibility of individual parents—and in many cases, individual mothers. This framing often results in structural discrimination against women in the workplace, as caring for children is treated as a special need of women who choose to have children rather than the societal necessity it undeniably is.

Across countries and industries, the challenge of ensuring all families can balance paid work and parenthood remains one of the greatest barriers to gender equality in the economy as well as a threat to our collective capacity to thrive. Over the past several decades, paid leave for new mothers has become almost universal, which has been pivotal in enabling women to return to their jobs after having a child. Yet paid maternity leave alone is not enough. To advance gender equality at home and at work, it's critical for countries to also provide paid leave for men, designed in a way to encourage equal take-up. And beyond parental leave, all families need access to affordable, quality childcare and early childhood education as well as the ability to take paid time off work to take their child to the doctor or provide care at home when they're sick. Moreover, it's critical to ensure that all of these supports are available to all families and all workers—if not, they cannot succeed at advancing gender equality for all at scale.

While much work remains, the successes across countries spanning regions and income levels give reason to be optimistic. In chapter 9, we illustrate how committed individuals and groups brought transformative change to countries across regions. Realizing the ability of all workers to balance work and caregiving remains essential—and achievable.

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