

Parental Leave

Bernard van Leer  FOUNDATION



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▶ In brief

Paid parental leave helps caregivers form a closer bond with their babies and toddlers – a vital relationship which improves children’s physical, cognitive and emotional development. It also strengthens child health, family relationships, and career outcomes for women. Despite overwhelming evidence on the benefits, access to parental leave and levels of coverage are very unequal globally. Governments have the tools to guarantee and encourage leave for both men and women.

3 THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ▶ Parental leave boosts child health and development, such as by increasing breastfeeding and vaccination rates
- ▶ But access to paid leave is inequitable, policies are still heavily gendered, and irregular workers are not covered
- ▶ Guaranteeing leave, promoting uptake and enforcing employment laws are key solutions

▸ What do we know?

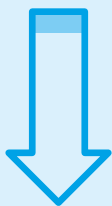
When it comes to parental leave, the evidence could not be clearer: it has a significant positive impact on child health and survival, developmental outcomes and relationships in the home. Whether they are biological or adoptive, the presence of parents is vital to healthy child outcomes.

A 10-week increase in paid maternity leave has been associated with a 9% decrease in under-5 mortality.¹ In low-and-middle-income countries, a one-month increase in maternity leave was associated with a 2.2-month increase in breastfeeding duration.² Increased breastfeeding duration (see our [Breastfeeding policy brief](#)) can dramatically improve young children's development and health. Paid parental leave also increases child vaccination rates and how often families attend medical visits.³

Both parents matter: studies have found that fathers taking more leave led to higher IQs in children and a lower likelihood of developmental problems.⁴ Access to paid maternity leave also reduces the odds of intimate partner violence in the first year after birth, as well lowering the likelihood of child maltreatment and physical abuse.⁵



▸ In numbers



9%

decrease in under-5 mortality with a 10-week increase in paid maternity leave⁶



15.6 million

women domestic workers globally have no legal rights to maternity protection⁷



3 in 5

Korean parents feel uncomfortable asking for parental leave at work⁸

▷ Why does it matter?

Enacting and strengthening parental leave is a vital tool for governments looking to make progress on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – such as tackling poverty and gender inequality.⁹

Parental leave is especially important for women in the workforce. Not only does it give them an extra incentive to work prior to childbirth but it facilitates their return to work afterwards.¹⁰ Paternity leave, meanwhile, is associated with a whole host of sustained family benefits, including higher earnings for mothers,¹¹ a more equal division of household chores,¹² and even a lower risk of divorce for married couples.¹³

Paid leave is particularly beneficial for low-income parents, who are more likely to not take leave after a new birth.¹⁴ This entrenches inequality as data shows that increased parent-child interactions during the early years directly leads

to better long-term life outcomes, including lower high school dropout rates and higher wages as an adult.¹⁵

Businesses also benefit from parental leave policies. Evidence suggests that companies which provide supportive leave allowance are better at retaining workers with specific skills, enjoy higher productivity and increased levels of employee motivation.¹⁶

In recent years, many countries have been introducing and expanding parental leave policies. However, leave length and provision of support greatly varies – from just weeks to more than a year, and at different levels of pay. **In many instances, informal workers including self-employed individuals are not covered.**

KEY ISSUES

- ▷ Breastfeeding
- ▷ Infant mortality
- ▷ Gender inequality
- ▷ Intergenerational poverty



Photo: Courtesy of Jon Spaully/Bernard van Leer Foundation

▷ What can policymakers do?

Governments and employers have several tools at their disposal to support child development by improving the length, generosity and participation in parental leave programmes.

Here are some of the most important interventions:

▷ Governments and businesses must **GUARANTEE PAID PARENTAL LEAVE**. The International Labour Organization recommends a minimum of 18 weeks of paid maternity leave.¹⁷

▷ Strengthen **EMPLOYMENT LAWS** to ensure parents can confidently take leave without risking their jobs, including support mechanisms like subsidies to encourage employers to comply.

▷ Expand coverage to the **INFORMAL WORKFORCE**. This could be done by extending social insurance coverage and creating legal definitions for informal work.



Photo: Courtesy of Jon Spaull/
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In **Brazil**, individual micro-entrepreneurs have been able to register for paid maternity leave since 2010, by paying a single social security contribution. When it came in, an estimated three million informal women workers became formalised.¹⁸

▷ Introduce a **“DADDY QUOTA”** to encourage paternity leave, where shared parental leave includes weeks which can only be taken by a father or second parent.



Photo: Courtesy of Martijn van Well

In **the Netherlands**, partner leave was extended from two days in 2018 to six weeks in 2020.¹⁹ A strategic alliance for legislative change coordinated action to highlight the issue in parliament, the media, and employer and employee organisations, particularly in the run up to the 2017 election.



Building a Leave Culture

▷ SOUTH KOREA'S PARENTAL LEAVE REFORMS

THE PROBLEM:

Participation in Korea's comprehensive paid leave has been low due to workplace culture, and coverage has not included millions of informal workers.²⁰

THE SOLUTION:

The government improved parental leave payments, introduced "daddy months" for second parents, and expanded coverage to more workers.

THE IMPACT:

22,297 men took parental leave in 2019, up 26.2% from 2018. During the same period, 105,165 parents overall took leave, an increase of 6% from 2018.²¹

HOW DOES IT WORK? To persuade parents to take leave, especially fathers, the government increased the provision of parental leave for second parents from 2014, and in 2019 expanded coverage to informal employees like domestic workers. The second parent to take leave gets three "daddy months" with 100% pay (up to a ceiling) like their partner, and then they each receive 50% for the remainder of a year.²²



"A lot of men who would like to take leave will not do so out of fear for repercussions to their career"

- Willem Adema, Senior Economist in the OECD Social Policy Division

Driven by concerns about the nation's low fertility rate, in recent years South Korea has been introducing a comprehensive set of family-friendly policies including childcare and parental leave. By 2016, it had established one of the most generous maternity and paternity leave policies in the world.

However, longstanding cultural norms meant most parents were not taking leave, and millions of informal workers could not qualify. The government offered paternity leave from 2007, for example, but in 2011 just 1,402 men took it.²³

By 2019, however, that number had risen to 22,297,²⁴ and several types of employees – like domestic and agricultural workers – were granted



eligibility.²⁵ The "daddy months" quotas, increased payment rates, lower eligibility requirements, and expansion of employment insurance helped to convince more parents to take leave.

Despite these improvements, take up still remains very low: in 2018, just over 30 parents claimed the benefit per 100 births, compared to 94 mothers and 35 fathers in Germany in 2016.²⁶ Although the culture is changing, the slow rate of improvement is partly due to fears of professional repercussions, with three in five Korean employees feeling uncomfortable asking for leave.²⁷

Much more needs to be done. Improvements would include increasing the payment rates and flexibility of parental leave, broadening access criteria to include more informal workers, and enforcing non-discrimination legislation to protect employees. With such a conservative corporate workplace culture, behavioural change interventions will be needed to understand and address the key barriers.

[READ MORE](#)

IFC (World Bank)

Guide for Employer-Supported Childcare: Complementary Family-Friendly Policies (Ch. 5)

<https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/da7fbf72-e4d9-4334-955f-671a104877a7/201911-A-guide-for-employer-supported-childcare.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=mVHadh3#page=59>

- ▶ For: how employers can make the workplace more family-friendly

Promundo

The MenCare Parental Leave Platform

<https://promundoglobal.org/resources/mencare-parental-leave-platform/>

- ▶ For: 10 ways to make parental leave truly equal between men and women

UNICEF

Paid parental leave and family-friendly policies. An evidence brief

<https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/UNICEF-Parental-Leave-Family-Friendly-Policies-2019.pdf>

- ▶ For: a global overview of paid parental leave and policy recommendations

UNICEF

Are the world's richest countries family friendly?

<https://www.unicef-irc.org/family-friendly>

- ▶ For: a breakdown of parental leave policies across the OECD and EU

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