



VOICES FROM THE FIELD - Parental Leave: An Important Social Policy

**Rianne Mahon, Director
Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University**

(Published online July 20, 2004)

Policy perspective

Parental leave – its duration, generosity of financial support – is indeed an important policy issue and the papers assembled by the CEECD provide a helpful entry.¹⁻⁵ Of particular value is Lero's careful assessment of the state of research in the field, which underlines the need to see parental leave as one factor among several determining maternal and child-health and child-development outcomes.² The involvement of fathers, sources of parental stress and family support, workplace factors and the availability and affordability of quality early childhood care all enter into the equation. While to some extent these factors are idiosyncratic, all are influenced by public policy as well as prevailing national (and local) attitudes and norms. Policy-makers therefore need to think about parental leave not only in terms of how long and at what level of support, but also about how parental-leave policies fit within a broader pattern of social and labour market policies.

The research really brings out an important problem: the greater part of research on this issue, available in English, is conducted in the United States, yet increasingly, the United States is an anomaly. The U.S., along with Canada and several European countries, has a high female labour force participation rate, a large part of which is full-time. It is also among the top countries in terms of the share of lone parents (mainly mothers). Yet until recently, there was no legislated right to parental leave and the 1993 legislation offered only 12 unpaid weeks' leave for those who met the conditions. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 requires a majority of lone parents and low-income parents to seek paid employment, while providing limited support for child care.⁶ This is in contrast to Europe and even Canada. While the European Union has embraced the goal of at least 60 percent female employment by the year 2010, it has also adopted norms of a 14-week paid maternity leave and three-month parental leave and is promoting the expansion of affordable, quality early childhood care. Canada has recently instituted a 50-week paid parental leave option and entered into a multilateral framework agreement with the provinces whereby the federal government agrees to spend \$900 million over five years to promote early childhood education and care.

This suggests, as Lero and Field note, that extreme caution must be exercised in generalizing from the American studies.^{2,4} Conversely, more comparative research needs to be done, with a greater effort to break down linguistic and other barriers to the

communication of research results from Europe. While the OECD's multi-country study, Starting Strong, focuses on early childhood education and care, it provides the kind of in-depth analysis of this important part of the broader context in which parents choose to work or to take leave at the birth of a child.

Europe, moreover, offers a variety of social and labour market policy combinations, with some countries favouring long leaves at low rates of remuneration while others favour shorter but better paid leaves.⁷ Some studies suggest that the former pattern produces a clear class-divided pattern, mothers with low education being the main users of long-term care.⁸ This raises the question of the extent to which class and race structure outcomes for children and their parents and how policy choices exacerbate or mitigate this.

Duxbury raises the important question of who takes the leave.⁵ She focuses on the fact that it is primarily women who take the leave, despite the use of the neutral term "parental." The shift from exclusively maternal leave to parental leave options and terminology does reflect an attempt to move away from the assumption that it is mothers whose behaviour and mental health count most for the development of children. Yet the latter assumptions remain deeply embedded in the literature, especially the studies arguing that "parental" employment in the early years leads to negative child development and "social capital" outcomes. The use of such apparently neutral terminology can have the unfortunate effect that even those who do not share this bias ignore the gendered leave-taking patterns and thus the implications of longer leave packages for women's equality with men. It is not, however, just a matter of women's equality. Too little attention is paid to "fathering" and the factors that influence the extent and manner of fathers' involvement. Some recent literature has begun to delve into experiences,⁹ but much more research – again, set within an explicitly comparative framework – needs to be done.

REFERENCES

1. Ruhm CJ. The effects of parental employment and parental leave on child health and development. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2002:1-6. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/RuhmANGxp.pdf>. Accessed July 19, 2004.
2. Lero DS. Research on Parental Leave Policies and Children's Development : Implications for Policy Makers and Service Providers. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-9. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/LeroANGxp.pdf>. Accessed July 19, 2004.
3. Kamerman SB. Maternity, paternity, and parental leave policies: The potential impacts on children and their families. Rev ed. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2005:1-4. Available at: http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/KamermanANGxp_rev-Parental.pdf. Accessed March 6, 2008.
4. Field TM. Parental Leave Policy : Comments on Lero, Kamerman and Ruhm In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-4. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/FieldANGxp.pdf>. Accessed July 19, 2004.
5. Duxbury L. Parental leave: A complex issue. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-6. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/DuxburyANGxp.pdf>. Accessed July 19, 2004.
6. Levy DU, Michel S. Child Care and Welfare Reform in the United States. In: *Child Care Policy at the Crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*. New York, NY: Routledge; 2002:239-266.
7. Mahon R. Child Care Policy: Toward what kind of "Social Europe"? *Social Politics* 2002;9(3):343-379.
8. Heinen J, de Koenigswater HM. Framing citizenship in France and Finland in the 1990's: Restructuring of motherhood, work and care. *Social Politics* 2001;8(2):170-181.
9. Jenson J, Sineau M. France: Reconciling republican equality with "Freedom of choice". In: Jenson J, Sineau M, eds. *Who Cares? Women, work and welfare state redesign*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press; 2001:88-117.
10. Salmi M. Analysing the Finnish homecare allowance system: Challenges to research and problems of interpretation. In: Kallioma-Puha L, ed. *Perspectives of equality: Work, women and family in the Nordic countries*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Council of Ministers; 2000:187-207.
11. Hobson B, ed. *Making men into fathers*. Cambridge; University Press; 2002.

12. Doucet A. *Do men mother?: Fatherhood, masculinity and domestic responsibility*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press; 2006.

To cite this document:

Mahon R. Voices from the field – Parental leave: An important social policy. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2004:1-4. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/MahonANGps.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

Copyright © 2004