



MenCare

A GLOBAL FATHERHOOD CAMPAIGN

The MenCare Parental Leave Platform

10 ways to leave gender
inequality behind and
give our children the
care they need

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We believe that true equality between men and women will not be reached until men and boys take on 50 percent of the caregiving and domestic work. Equal leave policies for both parents – policies that are well-paid and non-transferable – have been gaining global attention in recent years, for good reason. They have proven to be some of the most effective policies in encouraging men’s caregiving and promoting greater equality in the household, workplace, and society as a whole, particularly when embedded within broader strategies to reduce and redistribute care work (see point 8).¹

However, while maternity leave is now offered in nearly all countries, new fathers are only given leave in 92 countries, and in half of these, it is less than three weeks.² Now is the time to ensure the right of all parents to be able to care for their children and families.

Leave for fathers[†] – in conjunction with leave for mothers and additional structural solutions, and when enshrined in national policies – has the power to contribute significantly to the recognition and redistribution of care work and to transform deeply rooted inequalities between men and women. These policies can be an effective mechanism for changing the gendered dynamics of caregiving at home and elevating the status of caregiving more broadly. Leave for fathers promotes women’s equal pay and advancement in the workforce and men’s connectedness at home. It boosts employees’ morale and productivity, and reduces turnover. It allows governments to send a clear signal that all parents matter in the lives of their children.

[†] Paternity leave is the opportunity given to a father to take time off from work after the birth or adoption of a child; and parental leave, which refers to longer-term leave available to either or both parents, allows them to take care of an infant or child, usually after the initial maternity or paternity leave period.



MenCare is calling on governments and employers to adopt parental leave policies that are:

- 1.** Equal for women and men.
- 2.** Non-transferable between parents.
- 3.** Paid according to each parent's salary.
- 4.** Adequate in length for each parent, with a minimum of 16 weeks for each.
- 5.** Offered with job protection.
- 6.** Encouraged and incentivized.
- 7.** Inclusive for workers of all kinds.
- 8.** Combined with subsidized, high-quality childhood education and care, and other policies to ensure equity in all caregiving, particularly in low-income settings.
- 9.** Supportive of diverse caregivers and caregiving.
- 10.** Enshrined and enforced in national law and in international agreements.

1. Equal for women and men.

Leave should be guaranteed for both women and men in equal amounts. Anything less reinforces gender inequality, perpetuates women's lower pay, inhibits their career advancement relative to men's, and deprives men of the opportunity to be caregivers.

Leave provisions for fathers, which are shorter than those for mothers nearly everywhere, do not address or challenge the unequal burden of care that women face around the world. While providing leave for new mothers is non-negotiable,[‡] if we want the world's men to do half the caregiving, equality must be embedded in parental leave policies. In instances where leave is not offered equally, adjustments should be made to ensure that leave for fathers is extended to match leave for mothers in duration (and that the same is guaranteed for same-sex and adoptive parents). In all cases, leave for each parent should be adequate in length, and adequately paid (see points 3 and 4). Equal, non-transferable leave for mothers and fathers sends a powerful message that the care of children is the responsibility of all, and it has the power to establish a new norm around shared caregiving.

[‡] The International Labour Organization's Maternity Protection Convention, 2000, recommends a minimum of 14 weeks maternity leave "in order to further promote equality of all women in the workforce and the health and safety of the mother and child." (See ILO, 2014).

2. Non-transferable between parents.

Leave policies should be allotted as individual entitlements – designated for each parent – and offered as “use it or lose it.” This helps to encourage both men’s and women’s caregiving and supports a diversity of family structures.

*In Iceland, fathers averaged **39 days** of leave in 2001. After the fathers’ quota was instituted, this rose to **103 days** in 2008.³*

Non-transferable quotas, which are commonly known as “use it or lose it” leave or “fathers’ quotas”, may be one of the most important factors to encourage men’s uptake of leave and equal participation in care work.^{4,5,6,7} In Sweden and Iceland, which offer a non-transferable fathers’ quota, men’s uptake is much higher (90 percent) than it is in Denmark (24 percent) and Slovenia (6 percent), which don’t.⁸ Although families want and require choices and flexibility, if a portion of leave isn’t specifically designated for fathers, few men will take it, reinforcing inequalities at home and at work, and placing the responsibility for caregiving overwhelmingly on the mother.^{9,10,11} Consequently, assigning leave as an individual entitlement for each parent normalizes both men’s and women’s caregiving, does not require mothers to give up their leave days so that fathers can take leave, and better supports diverse family structures (see point 9).

3. Paid according to each parent's salary.

To support new parents and families, and in particular, to increase men's uptake of leave, it must be adequately paid, and ideally, paid in full through social security benefits. When leave is not paid (whether for mothers or fathers), many individuals simply cannot afford to take it. In countries that may not have social security systems in place, other public financing options should be proposed and supported.

*Uptake of leave in Estonia increased from **14 percent** of eligible fathers in 2007 to **50 percent** in 2008 after paternity leave benefits were increased to **100 percent** of previous earnings (financed by general taxation).¹²*

When possible, leave for parents should be paid in full, and this particularly affects fathers' uptake. Fathers across the European Union most frequently cited insufficient compensation as the reason for not taking leave.^{13,14,15} Some studies have shown that men's uptake of leave is highest at an income replacement rate of 80 percent or greater.^{§16,17,18,19}

§ Other studies (see O'Brien, 2009) recommend high income replacement (defined as an entitlement paid to all eligible fathers at 50 percent or more of earnings) as more effective than low income replacement (defined as an entitlement paid to all eligible fathers at a low flat rate, or at less than 50 percent of earnings, or for less than the full period of leave), although they have not further delineated findings above 50 percent income replacement.



There are various funding mechanisms which can be and have been used to cover employees' wages and benefits when they take leave: when considered to be a social security benefit, for example, employers may be reimbursed by the state. When social security alone does not provide for leave, collective financing – shared among the broader population as well as among employers – can equally distribute the cost and create broader, more stable support for leave that is more inclusive of all types and levels of workers.^{20,21}

4. Adequate in length for each parent, with a minimum of 16 weeks for each.

We endorse the European Union's recommendation of 16 weeks as the minimum length of leave necessary to adequately support parents in their roles as caregivers and in developing lifelong patterns of equality in caregiving.

Parental leave (excluding a specific period of post-partum leave for mothers) currently ranges from a single day to 90 days. The International Labour Organization (ILO) mandates a minimum leave period of 14 weeks for paid maternity leave and recommends at least 18 weeks. However, there is no ILO standard which specifically addresses paternity leave.²² We support the European Union's 2010 recommendation of at least 4 months (16 weeks) of leave for each parent** – and emphasize that such leave should be adequately paid and non-transferable.^{23,24} This recommendation is based, in part, on evidence that non-transferable leave for each parent – of adequate length – leads to measurable equality in pay between men and women, and to long-run equality in caregiving between men and women.

** This 16-week parental leave recommendation is distinct from preceding periods of maternity or paternity leave.

5. Offered with job protection.

No one should be forced out of his/her job, or suffer discrimination in pay or promotion, for taking leave to care for a child.

All leave policies should come with stipulations that ensure the person's job will be protected. As recommended by the ILO, parental leave should be available for either parent, without "relinquishing employment and with rights resulting from employment being safeguarded."²⁵ Additionally, offering job protection through parental leave increases the likelihood that both parents will take leave during their child's first year, and that both will return to work.²⁶

6. Encouraged and incentivized.

Even if a leave policy exists, if employers, peers, and society in general discourage its use, men (and many women) will not take it. Employers and governments should ensure that both women and men feel supported to take existing leave.

In cultures all over the world where masculinity is defined by economic and career success – and caregiving is seen as “women’s work” – men can face significant social pressure against participating in their children’s lives, and women continue to do the majority of the care work. The written and unwritten rules of work culture often tell boys and men that parenting and work/life balance should not be a significant concern. Employers often expect that men will make paid work their top priority, and their leave policies and workplace cultures reflect this expectation. Mothers also face challenges in the workplace, including short- and long-term repercussions for their own careers as a result of taking leave: missed opportunities, lack of advancement, lower wages, and the perception that they are not committed to their jobs.

When employers offer incentives, and when they ask when and not if their employees intend to take leave, they help to reduce stigma and encourage the use of leave by all parents.²⁷ The most effective leave policies also allow parents to decide when – within the first year of a child’s life – to take their leave. Employers may also benefit from offering it: providing paid leave is increasingly shown to improve employee retention, increase morale and productivity, and reduce absenteeism and associated training costs.^{28,29,30,31}

7. Inclusive for workers of all kinds.

Leave is often designed for and extended to the full-time, formal work force. Leave and other supportive policies must also be available for other types of workers, including those who work part-time, seasonally, short-term, or under contracts.

Generally, leave policies only apply to those who are in the formal labor market, and do not cover the millions – primarily in low-income countries, but also in high-income countries – who are employed in informal, short-term, part-time, or contract positions.³² To ensure that parental leave benefits are inclusive of non-formal workers, eligibility criteria should be explicit and barriers to entry low. In Spain, for example, maternity leave legislation explicitly covers casual, seasonal, and self-employed workers.³³ Additionally, some maternity leave provisions, such as those in Brazil, Nicaragua, and Peru have included unemployed women as beneficiaries of the policies.³⁴ Where individuals outside of full-time, salaried positions make up a large proportion of the work force, solutions in addition to leave – particularly those that are feasible for parents in low-income settings (see point 8) – may be necessary.

8. Combined with subsidized, high-quality childhood education and care, and other policies to ensure equity in all caregiving, particularly in low-income settings.

Paid, equitable parental leave must be combined with access to high-quality early childhood education and care for all children, as well as other measures to alleviate the burden of care and to change norms around caregiving.

Even when leave is offered for fathers, it is typically more accessible for higher-income families (who are more likely to be employed in the formal workforce and who can afford to take unpaid leave). Policies that support low- and middle-income families are necessary in addition to, and particularly in the absence of, adequate, paid, accessible parental leave. The Convention on the Rights of the Child reinforces the need for states to provide assistance to parents for child rearing and to “ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.”³⁵ Furthermore, policies that allow for flexible, reduced, and part-time work hours; sick leave; and predictable scheduling can help individuals to plan and provide care for their children. Subsidized, high-quality child care; the provision of other social services; and social security benefits, including tax allowances, tax subsidies, or payments to caregivers, can all reduce the burden of care, though they do not necessarily encourage men’s role in childcare.³⁶



In some countries, other policies will be needed to specifically encourage men's caregiving. These include: (a) school-based and community-based education on the benefits of gender equality as it relates to caregiving; (b) parent training for men and women; (c) interventions and campaigns with mothers, with extended family, and with healthcare professionals on the value of fathers' caregiving and the importance of engaging men in parenting via pre- and post-natal visits and the health system; (d) additional flexible leave policies in workplaces; and (e) policies and programs that encourage men to seek employment in non-traditional jobs, such as in early childhood education, healthcare, administration, and literacy.

9. Supportive of diverse caregivers and caregiving.

Leave should be offered to all caregivers, including same-sex, opposite-sex, adoptive, and single parents and parents of children with disabilities.

Leave policies should provide any parent with the time and conditions to bond with and raise their young children. Leave policies should be inclusive and equally applicable to same-sex parents, adoptive parents, single parents, and parents of children with disabilities.^{37,38} Leave policies that are designed as individual entitlements — regardless of the sex of the parent — can help in providing benefits to same-sex couples;³⁹ additional policies can be put in place to support single parents.

To ensure that individuals can receive care not only as children, but throughout their lifetime, policies that support caregiving for the elderly, disabled, and ill should also be adopted. Such policies should equally encourage men and women to be caregivers in order to avoid reinforcing gendered norms about who provides care.

10. Enshrined and enforced in national law and in international agreements.

Leave should not just be left to employers and individuals; it should be government-mandated, included within existing or new employment benefits or social insurance, and internationally backed.

Unpaid care work is often forgotten, unmeasured, and undervalued. This lack of recognition of care work has been a key driver of women's lower wages and disempowerment. Raising the profile of care on the international stage – and, in particular, encouraging men to take on an equal share of caregiving – is essential to the advancement of gender equality and to encourage women's participation in the paid workforce.

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that “States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents.”⁴⁰ However, even though key UN treaties have recognized maternity protections since 1919 (with varying levels of country implementation), paternity and parental leave for men have not been recognized by an equivalent standard or international agreement.⁴¹ In 2009, the ILO's Resolution Concerning Gender Equality at the Heart of Decent Work called for governments and others to create incentivized policies (including paternity and/or parental leave) that support a more equal division of work and family responsibilities.^{42,43} However, more efforts are needed: explicit guidelines and standards which support equal, well-paid, non-transferable parental leave should be adopted in international agreements and national policies addressing gender equality, labor conditions, and workers' rights.

Who does leave for fathers benefit?

- Women
- Children
- Men
- Employers
- Societies

Leave policies that offer paid, non-transferable leave for men and women help to advance gender equality, social justice, and the well-being of women, children, and men.



Leave for fathers benefits women

When men take leave, it helps women keep their jobs, their employability, and their prospects in the labor market; decreases women's care and domestic burden; and improves women's health and well-being.

When leave is primarily taken by women, it increases the chance that they will exit the workforce or will continue only in part-time work, which can affect their future job prospects.⁴⁴ When men also take leave, that changes: mothers have the option to participate more fully in the labor market, and may experience other health and relationship benefits as well. A study in Sweden found that for every month a father took paternity leave, the mother's income increased by nearly 7 percent, as measured 4 years later; this was, notably, more income than she lost taking her own leave.⁴⁵

Beyond improving women's economic prospects, men's leave can also reduce the burden of domestic work: surveyed almost 20 years after Norway instituted a "daddy quota", those parents with children born after the reform reported 11 percent less conflict over domestic work, and support for public childcare was 18 percent higher among those who became parents after the policy change than among those who became parents prior.^{46,47} Furthermore, in the UK, fathers who took leave after their child's birth were 19 percent more likely to participate in feedings and to get up with the baby during the night 8 to 12 months later, as compared to fathers who did not take leave.⁴⁸ Additionally, mothers' health may benefit when fathers take leave: in Norway, mothers' sickness-related absences from work were reduced by 5 to 10 percent in families where fathers took longer leave.⁴⁹



Leave for fathers benefits children

Globally, an overwhelming amount of evidence confirms that men's engaged and responsive participation in their children's lives has positive effects.

Leave for fathers encourages men's participation in their children's lives from early on. Fathers matter for children's emotional and intellectual development, including their development of empathy.^{50,51,52} Children's playful and affectionate interactions with their fathers can predict their positive social-emotional involvement with others, particularly with their peers, while harsh discipline can lead to behavioral problems down the road.^{53,54,55,56} Fathers' involvement early on can set the stage for lower rates of depression, fear, and self-doubt as their children grow, as well as for greater career and economic success.^{57,58,59,60,61,62}

Perhaps most importantly, men's caregiving can help to create a more gender-equitable future: children who see their fathers participating in their daily care are less likely to adhere to rigid gender norms later in life: girls, when they become women, may feel empowered to pursue less traditional jobs, and boys, when they are men, are more likely to do housework themselves.^{63,64,65,66,67,68}



Leave for fathers benefits men

Men who are involved in their children's lives have longer, healthier ones themselves. They experience better mental health, better relationships, and more personal satisfaction.

When men take on caregiving roles, they change in diverse ways, both biologically and psychologically.⁶⁹ Men's involvement in caregiving and fatherhood has been shown to improve men's physical and mental health.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the research shows positive outcomes when fathers engage in the home, including closer intimate relationships with their partners and happier, longer lives.⁷¹ When men are meaningfully involved with their children, they often report their relationship with their children as one of the most important sources of well-being and happiness in their lives.⁷² They can also experience a significant expansion in their personal identities, including a redefinition of what it means to be a man.



Leave for fathers benefits employers

Paid leave is increasingly shown to be good for business, improving retention of employees, increasing morale and productivity, reducing absenteeism and turnover, and reducing training and staff-replacement costs.^{73,74,75,76}

A US study has found that although many organizations have not developed a “business case” for leave, they have recognized that these policies can help to retain talent, establish consistent treatment of men and women (and birth, adoptive, and same-sex parents), and keep pace with the national trend of fathers actually taking leave.⁷⁷ In California, a large percentage of employers found that the state’s Paid Family Leave program had a positive or neutral effect on their employees’ productivity (reported by 89 percent of employers), profitability/performance (91 percent), turnover (96 percent), and employee morale (99 percent).⁷⁸ A new study of 22,000 companies in 91 countries finds women’s corporate leadership (in the boardroom and at the executive level) is positively correlated with the provision of leave for fathers.⁷⁹ Furthermore, when parental leave is equitable, women are more likely to return to work after leave, helping employers develop and retain a diverse workforce.^{80,81}



Leave for fathers benefits societies

Leave for fathers has benefits at all levels of society, contributing to the recognition and redistribution of care work, and to the transformation of deeply rooted inequalities between men and women.

Encouraging men to take on 50 percent of the world's caregiving provides space for women to participate and advance in the paid labor force and to pursue other interests, and allows for early and long-term bonding between children and fathers. It provides for more diverse and equal workspaces, governments, and homes, which can in turn contribute to increased national productivity and economic growth.⁸² Overall, men's equal participation in caregiving, supported by paid, non-transferable, equal leave, can lay the groundwork for a more equitable, caring society.

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MenCare is coordinated by Promundo and Sonke Gender Justice in collaboration with its Steering Committee: the MenEngage Alliance, Save the Children, and Rutgers.

