

Canadian Parental Benefits Program

Challenging or Supporting the Gendered Organization?

Organizations value and reward “ideal workers” who hold long-term and continuous employment—criteria which has disadvantaged women, especially mothers, in the paid workforce. State and employer-provided “family-friendly” benefits help to accommodate workforce participation by those with family responsibilities, thereby recognizing the value of family and home life. The federal Parental Benefit Program (PBP) in Canada has played an important role in supporting mothers’ attachment to paid work. However, a lack of support at the workplace level for parental leave claimants, and a tendency for couples to revert to a traditional breadwinner/homemaker model during leave, may result in outcomes which support the gendered organization and reproduce gender inequities. Inspired by Suzan Lewis’s article, “Family Friendly’ Employment Policies: A Route to Changing Organizational Culture or Playing About at the Margins?” and drawing on illustrative examples from a case study in Newfoundland and Labrador, this paper reviews literature on the impact of the PBP on gendered organizations and offers recommendations on how the role of the PBP may be enhanced.

Despite remarkable increases in women’s involvement in paid work over the last several decades, men continue to fare better in terms of earnings, job security, hours worked, and organizational hierarchy (Williams 23; Winson and Leach 29; Ferrao 13; Lyon and Woodward 209). Many of these inequities are further exacerbated by a woman’s “mother” status, and tend to grow with the number of children she has (Ferrao 9). One of the major obstacles to mothers’ competitive participation in and advancement through organizations is the conflict between the temporal demands of paid work and motherhood, and the tendency for organizations to value workers who hold long-term and

continuous employment over those who take lengthy and/or multiple career breaks (Crompton and Lyonette 245). The temporal availability valued by organizations is highly gendered and tends to disadvantage mothers in particular and reveals the gendered nature of organizations (Acker, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies” 151). Paid work may be made more accommodating to mothers with the introduction of various state and employer-provided “family-friendly” benefits, such as family leave programs and flexible scheduling, which help facilitate workforce participation by those with family responsibilities. The presence of such family-friendly benefits may therefore challenge the gendered organization by recognizing the value of family and home life, and by creating more equal opportunities for the workplace advancement of women and mothers. However, literature suggests that family-friendly benefits may not address the principles of the gendered organization and may therefore serve to reinforce existing gender inequities.

Used primarily by women, the Parental Benefit Program (PBP) in Canada allows temporary leave from paid work to fulfill the demands of caring for a new child (“Employment Insurance Maternity and Parental Benefits”). Historically, this program has played an important role in supporting mothers’ long-term involvement in the paid workforce. However, the potential of the PBP to truly challenge the gendered organization may be compromised, given the lack of support in the workplace for parental leave claimants, and the tendency for couples to adopt a breadwinner/homemaker model during parental leave. Until these issues are addressed at the workplace and policy levels, the PBP will continue to support rather than challenge the gendered organization, and will subsequently contribute to gender inequities that disadvantage working mothers and devalue family and home life.

This paper begins with a discussion of some of the principles of the ‘gendered organization,’ focusing in particular on the tendency for organizations to value long-term, continuous workers over those who take lengthy and/or multiple career breaks. In light of this discussion, what follows is a description of the PBP in Canada, and an exploration of how the PBP both challenges and supports the gendered organization. Finally, recommendations for enhancing the potential of the PBP to challenge the gendered organization are offered. This paper is based on a literature review, and is supported by examples from a case study conducted in the St. John’s and surrounding area in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. This case study explored working women’s experiences with and/or opinions of the PBP. Participants in the case study (n = 10) included women with and without children who ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-40s. All participants worked in a variety of professional occupations, had completed some post-secondary education, and identified as being in heterosexual relationships.

Gendered Organizations: Ideal Workers Versus Good Mothers

The dominant ontological and epistemological practices that underpin many social institutions in which men and women *both* participate have been largely constructed on the experiences and realities of men. As Dana Britton explains, “organizations and other institutions are conceptualized, designed, and controlled by men, and reflect their interests” (421). As a result, organizations are often masculine in structure; working women—and mothers especially—may find themselves faced with demands that do not reflect nor fit with their realities and life experiences (Smith 20).

To identify paid work as ‘masculine’ in nature is to imply that it values, in its structure, paid work over other life roles and responsibilities (such as family life). The structure of the organization can be identified in the demands of the job, which are based on assumptions about workers in that job, and which value and reward some attributes over others¹ (Acker, “The Future of Gender and Organizations” 197). Workers who are able and willing to give paid employment their full time, attention and energy tend to be most valued by organizations. These “ideal workers” (Coltrane 215) prioritize paid employment over other life roles, work long hours and hold long-term and continuous employment, and are subsequently rewarded with praise, money, promotion, security, and status² (Carney 117; Crompton and Lyonette 245; Peterson 336).

The demand for long-term and unrestricted temporal availability in the workplace is generally met more easily by heterosexual male employees (Purcell, MacArthur, and Samblanet 711)—historically those with stay-at-home wives (Kanter 123), and currently those with wives who, employed in the paid workforce or not, ascribe to discourses of “good” mothering (O’Reilly 10) and participate in a more traditional gendered division of labour. As Carole Pate-man notes: “...the employment contract presupposes the marriage contract...as the construction of the worker presupposes he is a man who has a woman, a (house)wife, to take care of his daily needs” (131). Historically, male workers are able to achieve ideal worker status through the labour of their wives and female secretaries. Rosabeth Kanter illustrates in *Men and Women of the Corporation* how men are often relieved of all of the interactive, physical, material tasks in the workplace that must be completed in the run of a day by their female partner and/or secretary, thereby freeing up time to focus on tasks more pertinent to success in the workplace (e.g., meeting deadlines, completing projects). That is, men who have been able to participate fully and advance through organizations more than women because they have been relieved of most responsibilities for unpaid work by their female partners (Carney 117; Coltrane 215).

A division of labour which allocates primary responsibility for paid work to

men and primary responsibility for unpaid home and family work to women is a foundational underpinning of the gendered organization, as it has historically granted men the temporal freedom to behave as ideal workers. As women have entered the paid workforce in greater numbers in the last four decades, the structure of paid work and the expectations of workers continue to assume a breadwinner/homemaker model. For women, this has meant managing participation in paid work while also remaining primarily responsible for the family and home. As Courtney, who is married and does not have children, describes:

For women, it's the idea of "you can do anything, you can be anything" ... but at the same time, there's not that 50-50 split in domestic roles. So it's still like 'you can do anything you want to do,' but at the same time you have to be home cooking supper, you have to be doing this and you have to be doing that.... And I don't see that changing as drastically with men, and I can see why they wouldn't [want to], cause that's a lot of extra responsibility for them.

It may be more difficult for mothers to behave as ideal workers given their continued responsibility for the family and home. In particular, the intensive, long-term care work involved in "good" mothering often leads to career interruptions (Carney 117; Purcell, MacArthur, and Samblanet 710), which presents a barrier for mothers in attaining ideal worker status.

As Rosemary Crompton and Clare Lyonette aptly note, work/parent incompatibilities are similarly experienced by men who take on primary caregiving and houseworking roles while at once participating in paid employment (242); however, such challenges are still experienced most acutely by women (Gerson 53). In addition to reinforcing gender inequities in the labour market, expectations of long-term and continuous employment may negatively impact family and home life. Nancy, a mother of two young children, reflects on her daily struggle to manage paid work and family life, "I never thought I'd say this, but, I'd rather stay home. I always thought I'd want to work. I just find it too hard, and I find that [my children] are suffering."

Given the conflicting demands of "good" mothering with ideal working, and the negative outcomes for mothers and families, there is a need to restructure the demands of paid work to reflect the needs of the new "feminized" workforce. One strategy has been the introduction of family-friendly benefits, such as parental leave, to help individuals reconcile their work and family roles. The PBP in Canada has been an important program in supporting mothers' participation in paid work and in recognizing the value of family and home life. However, the impact of this family-friendly benefit on the gendered or-

ganization is not clear; a discussion of how the PBP supports and challenges the gendered organization is provided next.

Parental Benefits Program in Canada

The introduction of maternity, and later parental, leave benefits in Canada responded to the increased involvement of women and mothers in paid employment, and the subsequent need for more work-family support. The PBP in Canada offers support to working parents upon the birth or adoption of a new child, by allowing job-protected and compensated time away from employment for up to one year (Tremblay and Genin 533). A mothers-only maternity leave program was introduced in Canada in 1970, was expanded by the addition of a "parental leave" in 1990 (which opened the program to both eligible mothers and fathers), and grew more generous in length in 2001. At present, the PBP includes 15-17 weeks of maternity leave for mothers only, and 35 weeks of parental leave³ which can be shared between mothers and/or fathers at their discretion, at a wage replacement of 55 percent of the claimant's previous weekly insurable earnings (to a maximum of \$468 per week).⁴ Claimants of parental leave in Canada are legally protected from various negative employer actions; for example, companies cannot "dismiss, suspend, layoff, demote nor discipline" individuals on the basis of their use of the PBP, nor can they be denied promotion or training ("Anti-Discrimination Clauses Related to Pregnancy and Maternity Leave"). Working parents should feel comfortable to take parental leave from work without fearing job loss or other maltreatment by employers. To supplement the cut in income for parental leave claimants, some employers 'top-up' state-provided benefits by offering extra financial compensation to their employees on leave (Marshall, "Employer Top-up" 5).

Program Take-Up

Despite its availability to both men and women, and despite the gender-neutral language of the policy (Evans 119), mothers in Canada tend to use parental leave benefits more often and for longer durations than fathers (Mandel and Semyonov 951; Statistics Canada). A number of factors may help explain the gendered difference in take-up rates, such as the earnings gap between male and female parents (Evans 123), traditional gendered divisions of labour and social norms regarding "good" mothering and fathering (Doucet 89), and the emphasized importance of breastfeeding in the first year (Berger, Hill and Waldfogel 33). Similarly, Janet Smithson and Elizabeth H. Stokoe suggest that the lack of take-up of family-friendly or work-life policies by men can be explained by the barriers of gender expectations and organizational cultures

that discourage their use of benefits (150). A culture promoting traditional gender roles may dictate how mothers and fathers approach parental leave; as Kathleen bluntly notes, “my husband wouldn’t be supported [in the workplace] if he took parental leave.” Involvement of fathers in family and carework runs counter to the principles of traditional masculinity, consequently, fathers requesting leave from work to fulfill family roles is generally discouraged. For myriad reasons, mothers continue to be the primary beneficiaries of the PBP in Canada (Evans 119).

In Canada in 2010, 69.9 percent of all recent mothers received maternity/parental leave benefits, while only 29.7 percent of new or soon-to-be fathers used or planned to use benefits (Statistics Canada). The take-up rate of parental leave by fathers in Canada has been increasing since benefits were extended to them in 1990, but a remarkable hike in take-up rates by fathers in recent years is largely due to the high participation by fathers in Quebec, following the introduction of the Quebec Parental Insurance Program in 2006 (Marshall, “Fathers’ Use of Paid Parental Leave” 12). In addition to taking parental leave more often, women in Canada also tend to take longer periods of leave than men (Evans 126). For example, of all claimants with spouses, mothers claimed an average of approximately 46 weeks; fathers claimed an average of just under two weeks (Marshall, “Employer Top-up” Table 4, 11). These trends are reflected in program take-up by working mothers in my case study, all of whom had male spouses: all the mothers claimed at least a portion of the available leave (ranging from six weeks to one year), and none of the male spouses claimed any.

Parental Leave: Challenging the Gendered Organization

Without options for job-protected and compensated parental leave, maintaining long-term employment can be very difficult for mothers (Gerson 55). Before the introduction of a parental leave program in Canada, having a child signaled the end of workforce participation for many of the women who could financially afford to withdraw. Paid parental leave programs have enabled more women, especially mothers of young children, to join and continue to participate in the economically active workforce (Acker, “The Future of Gendered Organizations” 198; Gornick and Meyers 320; Mandel and Semyonov 951). Importantly, leave length has been found to be a key factor in determining whether mothers maintain their attachment to the paid workforce after parental leave (Baxter 15); moderate-length leave (typically about a year long) tends to encourage mothers to return to paid work, while shorter and longer leaves tend to negatively affect mothers’ employment (Misra, Budig and Boeckmann 140). The PBP in Canada, offering one year

of paid leave, is appropriately designed to help improve the overall position of women in the paid workforce (Evans 119).

In addition to supporting the position of women and mothers in the paid workforce, parental leave affords individuals the opportunity to spend more time and attention on family. The rationale given for expanding the PBP in 2001 emphasized the importance of parents providing care to children in the first year (Evans 121). While research is inconclusive, it has been argued that uninterrupted time with a child in their early years is critical for their emotional and intellectual development (Galtry and Callister 230-231). As well, since direct parent care may be given to the child in this first year, most parents do not have to arrange for external childcare. For those who are eligible and can financially afford to take parental leave in Canada,⁵ the opportunity to spend up to a year providing direct care to a new child without having to juggle the responsibilities of paid work is a precious benefit. Many working parents try to make the most of this family-oriented time; as Lisa, currently on parental leave, describes: “I’m trying to give my daughter as much as I can, while I can.” In its design, the PBP encourages working parents to prioritize (albeit temporarily) family and home life over paid work.

The introduction of a program that both encourages women’s participation in the paid workforce, and affords employees the opportunity to take protected and compensated leave from their employment to respond to family demands runs counter to some of the principles of the gendered organization. Granting up to a year of paid leave following the birth or adoption of a child symbolically recognizes that there is value in family and home life, and that paid employment exists within a complex set of social institutions, roles, and responsibilities that individuals manage participation in. In its role in supporting the long-term attachment of women and mothers to paid work, in emphasizing the importance of childcare and family, and in its recognition that not all employees can hold long-term and continuous employment, the PBP challenges the gendered organization.

Parental Leave: Supporting the Gendered Organization

The role of the PBP in supporting mothers’ participation in paid work highlights how parental leave has helped restructure the organization to more adequately reflect the needs of mothers and families. As well, emphasis on the importance of childcare and family signals a breaking down of the historically masculine organization of paid work. However, a lack of workplace support for parental leave claimants and a tendency for couples to adopt a breadwinner/homemaker model during parental leave may undermine its potential to truly challenge the gendered organization.

Firstly, though there are laws against explicit discrimination on the grounds of gender and “parent status” in the workplace, many studies have reported on the more implicit career-related risks of using family-friendly benefits (e.g., Baker 326; Evertsson and Duvander 445; Fudge 194). Access to opportunities for advancement is improved by acquiring appropriate training and information, strengthening human and social capital, and establishing a reputation as a committed employee, and claimants of parental leave may experience difficulties in accessing such opportunities. An example of implicit discrimination against parental leave claimants is that while away from work on parental leave, individuals are often “out of the loop,” losing out on information on new policies and procedures, training opportunities, and workplace news and conversation. As participant Jillian, 32 years old and without children, critically reflects, while on parental leave “you could miss out on opportunities for promotions, for movement, experience ... like the French class I’m taking now, I can’t do that when I’m on maternity leave.” As well, parental leave claimants may lack a sense of involvement at work, and suffer a substantial, if short-term, decrease in income while away from work. In addition, *future* earnings and/or opportunities for advancement may be negatively affected (Marshall, “Employer Top-up” 5; Walby 50).

Taking lengthy and/or multiple parental leaves from work may be frowned upon by co-workers and/or employers and may negatively impact how an employee is perceived in the workplace (Gerten 49). Kathleen, a senior-level employee in her workplace, conformed to the principles of ideal working by minimizing her time away on parental leave to three months for her first child, and just six weeks for her second. She believes she was recognized positively for this decision by her co-workers:

I think I got a lot of support because I did come back early. People knew it was a difficult decision, but you know, from the professional part of it, they respected me for making that decision.

A workplace culture that supports this decision encourages ideal working and thereby reinforces the gendered organization. Despite the intentions of the PBP to recognize the importance of family and home life, the potential of parental leave to challenge the gendered organization may be undermined at the workplace level. Employees who take parental leave from paid work are not protected from the implicit, systemic discrimination at the workplace level that punishes employees whose employment histories are interrupted by parental leave(s). Taking lengthy and/or multiple career breaks for parental leave runs counter to the behaviour of the ideal worker who holds long-term, continuous employment. Those who take parental leave risk becoming perceived as less

than ideal workers. Importantly, because women take the overwhelming majority of parental leave in Canada, the career risks of taking leave are particularly pronounced for mothers (Evans 123; Marshall, “Fathers’ Use of Paid Parental Leave” 8). Lack of protection for leave-taking employees at the workplace level tends to support the gendered organization.

Secondly, and related to the first point, couples may adopt a traditional breadwinner/homemaker model during parental leave, a dynamic that has served as a key underpinning of the gendered organization. Because women take more and longer leaves than men, women tend to be at home and men at work more often during the child’s first year. In general, having children tends to preserve a traditional gendered division of care and domestic work between heterosexual parents (Bouffartigue 229), and this division may be especially evident when parental leave is being used. Rachel, a younger woman who plans to have a child with her husband in the future, predicts that upon having a child, their division of housework

... would change a lot. I think I would probably be in control of a lot of things at home. Especially in the first year, I’d have to do a lot more of the duties because he’ll probably be working while I’m home. During the daytime it would be all me, but in the evenings and especially overnights, he would be helping out.

Since mothers take the majority of parental leave in Canada, they spend more time at home following the birth or adoption of a child, often while their male partners continue to hold their employment and cultivate opportunities for rewards and advancement. The at-home setting in which most parent-provided infant care takes place, coupled with the tendency for women to take the greater portion of parental leave, may encourage a traditional gendered division of labour between heterosexual parents, a reverting back to the breadwinner/homemaker model during parental leave. As discussed, this model has been very important for the success of men within the organization, and has historically served to stall the participation and advancement of women in paid work.

The opportunity to participate in PBP has helped women and mothers to maintain their long-term participation in paid work; however, participation in the program may yield career and household outcomes that serve to reinforce gender inequities in paid work. Despite job protections and other legislation that address the problems of discrimination against employees who use parental leave, there is evidence of implicit discrimination at the workplace level. Taking parental leave may not be fully supported in the workplace, and parental leave claimants may be subject to negative career outcomes. As mothers are the primary beneficiaries of the PBP, negative career outcomes fall primarily

to mothers. Related to this, because mothers participate to a greater degree in the PBP than fathers, heterosexual couples may be encouraged to cultivate a more traditional gendered division of labour in the home—the breadwinner/homemaker model—which has served to support the gendered organization historically. For these reasons, the PBP in Canada may serve to support rather than challenge the gendered organization.

Recommendations

Given the barriers previously discussed, the remainder of this paper provides recommendations, at both the workplace and policy levels, for enhancing the role of the PBP in challenging the gendered organization. At the workplace level, efforts should be made by employers to reduce career-related consequences of taking lengthy and/or multiple parental leaves. As discussed, employees who take lengthy and/or multiple leaves during their careers often become less competitive with their non-leave-taking counterparts. Parental leave claimants may feel “out of the loop” at work, and may miss out on current and/or future opportunities in the workplace which are key to advancement. This implicit, systemic discrimination may be combated by workplace initiatives that ensure employees who take parental leave will not consequently fall behind in the workplace. In addition to providing a ‘top-up’ for employees taking parental leave, employers may consider introducing work-leave integration strategies. Work-leave integration strategies provide employees with the opportunity to remain connected to the workplace while on parental leave, by receiving information regarding any new training or procedures (Heywood and Jirjahn 124) and social events. By maintaining a connection to their employer while on parental leave, even by simply reviewing new policies as they are instituted or attending an occasional social event, employees may reduce the negative career impacts of taking parental leave. Employers may consider implementing other policies that keep parental leave claimants competitive with their non-leave-taking counterparts in terms of scheduled raises and other benefits.

At the policy level, initiatives should be directed at addressing the unequal take-up of the PBP by mothers and fathers to combat the tendency for couples to establish a traditional breadwinner/homemaker model during leave. As discussed, fathers may be discouraged from taking participating in the PBP for a variety of reasons, including gender ideologies which ascribe caregiving roles to mothers and not fathers, and the financial rationality of having the second earner in a dual-earner couple (usually the woman) take leave. Equaling up the program take-up rates by mothers and fathers would likely help to reduce the negative career and household outcomes that reinforce gender inequities. Having fathers participate to a greater degree in the PBP would not challenge

the structure of the gendered organization, but would more evenly distribute negative career outcomes between mothers and fathers. As well, increasing the participation of fathers in the PBP would circumvent possibilities of couples reverting into a breadwinner/homemaker model.

Possible strategies to encourage fathers to increase participation in the PBP in Canada include offering a fathers-only “paternity leave,” and increasing the wage replacement rate. Offering a non-transferable paternity leave, like the mothers-only maternity leave benefit, would symbolically recognize the importance of fathers in family and home life and may encourage greater participation in the PBP in Canada. A use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave benefit, such as that offered in Quebec and Sweden, has been found to increase fathers’ participation in parental leave programs (Marshall, “Fathers’ Use of Paid Parental Leave” 8). Mandated guidelines for taking leave for mothers and fathers may allow families to operate outside of existing social norms concerning gender roles. It should not be expected that a paternity leave would undo a history of gender ideologies; in Quebec and Sweden, where paternity leave has been introduced, fathers are still taking a smaller portion of parental leave than mothers (Klinth 21).

Finally, increasing the wage replacement rate while on parental leave may encourage more fathers to take leave. As men are more often still the primary breadwinners in Canada (Sussman and Bonnell 10), it often makes more financial sense in a dual-earner couple for the mother, rather than the father, to take leave from paid work. Research suggests that higher wage replacement rates result in greater participation in parental leave by fathers (Evans 126; Marshall, “Fathers’ Use of Paid Parental Leave” 13). As well, offering working parents a more generous wage while on parental leave would more appropriately signal the value of family and home life.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of the parental leave in challenging and supporting the gendered organization. Organizations value long-term and continuous temporal availability, preferences that have presented a major barrier in mothers’ participation and success in paid work. Having the capacity to behave as an ideal worker is highly gendered, as men and fathers have historically been granted the temporal freedom to prioritize their paid employment over other life roles, thereby reaping organizational rewards. A “family-friendly” benefit, the PBP in Canada was introduced to help make paid work more accommodating to workers with family responsibilities—mothers, in particular. Historically, the PBP in Canada has proven to be an important program in supporting women’s, especially mothers’, long-term attachment to paid work, and in recognizing the importance of family and home life. However, the potential of the PBP to

truly challenge the gendered organization may be undermined by the lack of workplace support for parental leave claimants, and the tendency for couples to adopt a breadwinner/homemaker model during leave. These outcomes support the principles of the gendered organization, and reinforce gender inequities that disadvantage working mothers. To enhance the role of the PBP in challenging the gendered organization, it is recommended that strategies aim to reduce negative career outcomes for parental leave claimants, and to encourage greater participation of fathers in the program.

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¹Organizations may be gendered in many ways. For example, the type of work carried out therein may be seen as more compatible with “masculine” employee traits (e.g., physical labour), or the workforce in an organization may be dominated by males or females (for helpful explanations of “gendered organizations,” please refer to Acker, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies”; Britton). In this paper, I focus on the extent that an organization desires long-term, continuous workers as revealing of its gendered nature.

²Some scholars have suggested that criteria for ideal workers are not static across time, space, and industry (e.g., Tiernari, Quack and Theobald); however, many studies indicate that long-term temporal availability for paid work is one of the more universal qualities of the ideal worker (e.g., Peterson; Van Echtelt, Glebbeek, Lewis and Lindenberg).

³In this paper I use the term “parental leave” to include all of the benefits under the PBP (maternity leave and parental leave).

⁴To access parental leave benefits in Canada, claimants must meet certain eligibility criteria, such as having worked 600 hours in the previous year (“Employment Insurance Maternity and Parental Benefits”).

⁵Access to and use of the PBP in Canada is highly classed; only individuals who can financially afford to receive 55 percent of their previous insurable earnings, for however long, can avail of the PBP.

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