

The International Corner

Work and Family In the United Kingdom

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Over the past decade, public policies intended to support working families have gained prominence in the United Kingdom. This priority became a key element of the policy framework of the Labour Party when it returned to office in 1997, and continues to be central to the agendas of all political parties as the next national election approaches in 2010.

The decade has seen a series of legislative changes related to work and family. These have included the introduction of statutory entitlements for parents to request flexible working schedules, an extension of the period of paid maternity leave, and, in 2003, introducing a statutory right to paternity leave for the first time in Britain.

By 2009, the maternity leave period reached 52 weeks. However, unlike other European countries, only a small proportion of that time — 6 weeks — is highly paid, at 90 per cent of earnings. A further 33 weeks of maternity leave is paid at a lower flat rate, and the remainder is unpaid. The paternity leave period is 2 weeks and paid at the low flat rate. Adoptive parents are included in these provisions.

Working parents fund the payments through national insurance contributions, and all citizens support them through income tax. Recent estimates from Britain's Equality and Human Rights Commission suggest that the British leave system costs 0.15% of GDP, a much lower percentage than that of our Nordic neighbors with more generous leave systems (0.47% Norway; 0.67% Sweden).

The extension of the period of maternity leave has led to an increase in the length of leave taken and an enhancement in return-to-work rates for mothers. Linkage to the labor market is promoted through up to 10 "Keeping in Touch" days, whereby organizations can offer updates and training to mothers on leave without loss of statutory income. Typically, about 80% of women who are employed during pregnancy use maternity leave and majority of these are back at work by the time the child reaches 9 to 10 months.

However, many women switch to part-time contracts or reduce working hours until their children start school, as high-quality child care for children in their early years is not always locally available, despite significant government investment in nurseries. A quarter of mothers work full-time when their children are of preschool age (0-4 years), and 38% work part-time. Britain has a tradition of mothers working part-time and fathers working full-time, with a "long-hours" culture.

In April 2007, the right to request flexible working was extended to employees who care for an adult. In November 2007, the Walsh Review, an independent review of the benefits and costs of extending this right to

parents of older children (6 to 17 years,) was announced. Based on the recommendations from this review, the right to request flexible work has been extended to all parents of children aged 16 years and under (from April 6, 2009) — despite earlier concerns about implementing such a measure during an economic downturn.

The option of being able to work flexibly is generally popular with parents and is less costly than leave. Nonetheless, the actual use of formal flexibility has not been as high as anticipated. Generally, utilization has been greater for mothers than for fathers, although rates have risen for fathers in the postnatal period.

A hot topic at the moment is the U.K. government's proposal to introduce a new right that would allow fathers to take up to six months of "Additional Paternity Leave" (APL) during the child's first year, if the mother returned to work before the end of her maternity leave. (In other words, the father's right to take leave is conditional on the mother not using her full entitlement to maternity leave.) Some of this APL can be paid (at the low flat rate) if the mother has some of her entitlement to maternity pay remaining at the time of her return to work. It will be the choice of the mother as to whether she uses all her leave and pay entitlements or returns to work early.

The proposal is being framed as giving parents more care choices and enabling eligible fathers to take leave. Because evidence from research done internationally suggests that low-paid transferable leave tends not to be taken by many fathers, there are concerns with the proposed design. A national consultation is taking place, and if implementation of the proposal is agreed upon before the election, APL will be on the statute books for fathers of children due on or after April 3, 2011.

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