

Paid Leave for New Parents

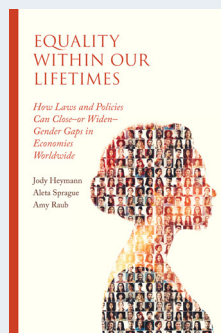
Key Findings

- Paid leave for new mothers has become almost universal: 96% of countries have a national guarantee.
- However, to promote equality in parental responsibilities—which matters to equality at work—it is also critical to provide paid leave for men. Yet only 63% of countries make any paid leave available for fathers.
- Beyond just making leave available, policy design matters to whether all parents can take leave.
- More than 1 in 3 countries have yet to meet the minimum global standard of providing 14+ weeks to mothers.
- Only 1 in 10 countries reserve at least 3 weeks for fathers.
- In 57% of countries, there is no paid leave available to adoptive parents of infants.

About Equality within Our Lifetimes

For more information and a full list of studies summarized in this brief, see [Chapter 6](#) of the open-access book [Equality within Our Lifetimes: How Laws and Policies Can Close—or Widen—Gender Gaps in Economies Worldwide](#) (Jody Heymann, Aleta Sprague, and Amy Raub; University of California Press, 2023).

Building and analyzing a law and policy database that covers 193 countries, *Equality within Our Lifetimes* systematically examines how far we've come and how far we have to go in adopting evidence-based solutions to close gender gaps in employment, income, leadership opportunities, and more.



This brief examines countries' approaches to providing paid leave for new parents, which can support gender equality both in the workforce and in caregiving when well designed.

Benefits of Paid Leave for New Parents

Research on maternity leave has found wide-ranging benefits for both women's employment and long-term health:

- A study of 117 countries found that women ages 25–55 were more likely to participate in the labor force when paid maternity leave of moderate length was available.
- A study of 8 European countries found that more generous maternity leave at the time of a woman's first birth reduced her likelihood of depression later in life.

Studies of paternity and parental leave have likewise found benefits for women's employment, particularly when a portion of leave is reserved for fathers and nontransferable:

- In Norway, the introduction of a 10-week fathers' quota, alongside affordable childcare, increased women's labor force attachment.
- In Sweden, 8 years after a portion of parental leave was reserved for fathers, a study found that for each month of parental leave taken by her partner, a woman's subsequent earnings increased by nearly 7%.
- In Spain, the introduction of 13 days' paternity leave increased mothers' probability of reemployment following childbirth by 11%.

When women are able to stay in the workforce, entire economies benefit:

- One estimate found that equalizing labor force participation rates among men and women would add \$12 trillion to the global economy over a decade.
- Among countries that have provided paid maternity and/or parental leave for the past few decades, rates of female employment have boosted GDP per capita growth by 10–20%.

In addition to improving women's economic outcomes, paid leave enables fathers to engage more deeply in caregiving and facilitates more equal roles between parents:

- In Quebec, the introduction of 2 months' parental leave reserved for fathers led to men spending 2.2 additional hours each week providing care for their children on their own.
- In Norway, after the introduction of a quota of parental leave for new fathers, families were less likely to report having conflicts about the division of household work.

Across widely varying economies, paid leave for new parents has been found to benefit children's health and development:

- Studies of policy changes in 20+ low- and middle-income countries found that extending paid maternity leave reduced infant mortality rates; increased children's DTP immunization rates; reduced children's incidence of bloody diarrhea; and increased rates of breastfeeding, which benefits both women's and children's health (for more information about these studies, see Additional Resources.)
- A study of 18 high-income countries found that increases in paid parental leave were associated with reductions in infant and postneonatal mortality.

- Evidence from across countries shows that fathers' nurturing engagement with their children, facilitated by paid leave, can significantly benefit children's emotional and cognitive development.

Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga—have yet to adopt a nationwide paid leave policy.

- 63% of countries have ensured that men have some form of access to paid leave.

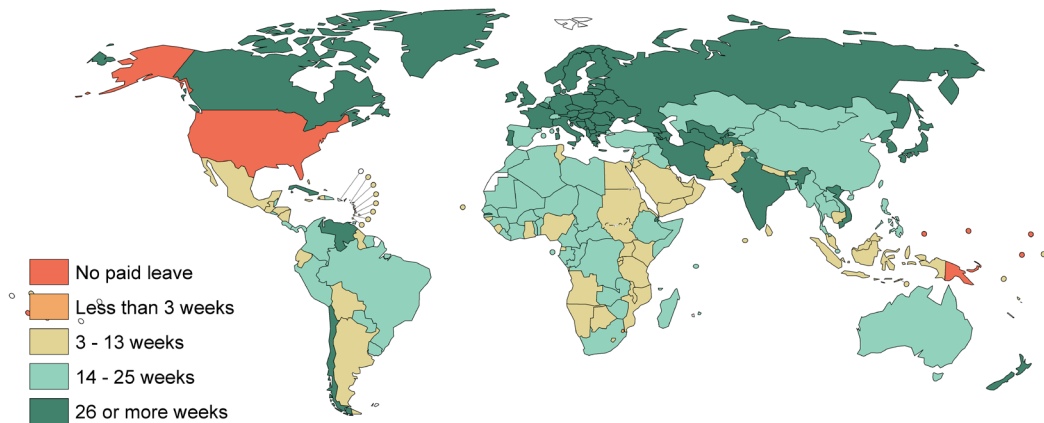
How Common Is Paid Leave for New Parents Globally?

As of January 2022, the vast majority of countries provide some amount of paid leave for mothers and/or shared parental leave—but paid leave for fathers is markedly less common:

Countries provide varying durations of paid leave to new parents:

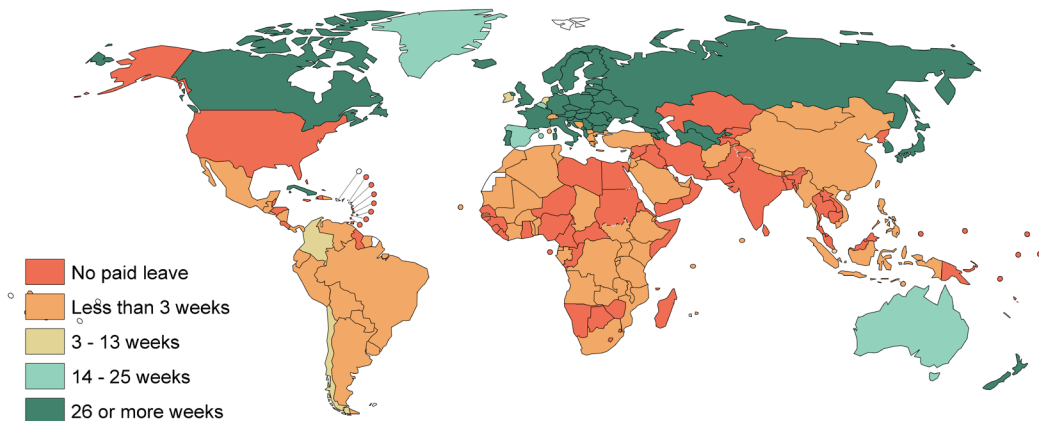
- 96% of countries have adopted a nationwide policy providing paid leave reserved for mothers and/or shared parental leave.
 - Only 7 countries—the U.S., Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga—have yet to adopt a nationwide paid leave policy.
- 62% of countries provide women at least 14 weeks of paid leave (the minimum standard established by the ILO).
- 23% of countries ensure that men have access to at least 14 weeks of paid leave.
- 28% of countries provide at least 6 months of paid leave to women, which facilitates the 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding recommended by the WHO.
- High-income countries are much more likely than low- or

Is paid leave available for mothers of infants?



Source: WORLD Policy Analysis Center, Adult Labor Database, 2022

Is paid leave available for fathers of infants?



Source: WORLD Policy Analysis Center, Adult Labor Database, 2022

middle-income countries to ensure access to lengthier paid leave.

The past several decades have witnessed a growing recognition of the importance of paid leave for fathers, but in far too many countries, the leave length remains grossly unequal:

- 63% of countries provided paid paternal leave in 2022, compared to only 24% in 1995.
- 74% of countries provide no paid leave or less than 3 weeks of paid leave to fathers, compared to only 4% for mothers.
- Only a small minority of countries have adopted policies to incentivize men’s take-up of leave.

Paid Leave Reserved for Mothers

The most common form of paid leave globally is leave reserved for mothers who have given birth.

- 94% of countries also allow or even require women to take paid leave before birth, which can support maternal and infant health during complex pregnancies.
- 62% of countries reserve at least 14 weeks of paid leave for birth mothers.
- 15% of countries reserve 6 months of paid leave for birth mothers.

Paid Leave Reserved for Fathers/Partners

Far fewer countries reserve adequate paid leave for men—even as research shows that father-specific allocations are critical to men’s higher take-up and the attendant benefits for women’s economic opportunities.

- 55% of countries reserve paid leave for fathers/partners, but it is often very short: 45% of countries reserve less than

3 weeks of paid leave for fathers/partners.

- Only 7% of countries reserve at least 14 weeks of paid leave for fathers/partners, and an additional 3% provide more leave or a higher wage replacement rate when both parents take shared parental leave.

Shared Paid Leave Available for Either Parent

Making leave available to either parent is a step toward facilitating equality in infant caregiving—yet without incentives to shift behavior, women predominantly take these leaves.

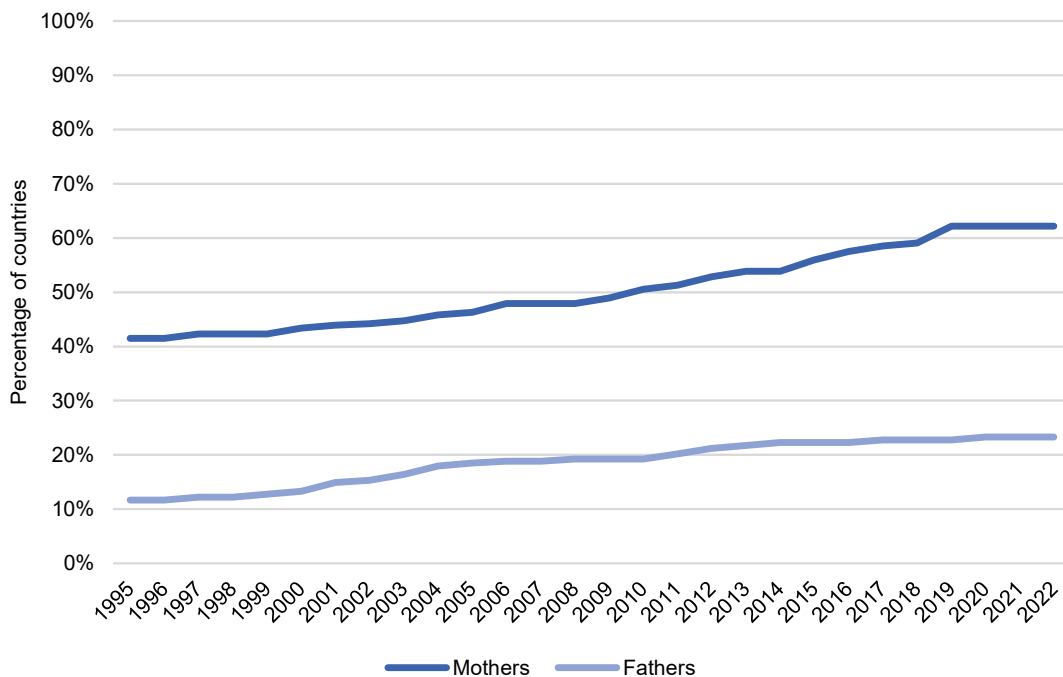
- 16% of countries provide shared parental leave that is available for either parent to take.
- Shared leave is generally lengthy: 26 of 30 countries with shared paid parental leave guarantee 26 weeks or more.

Affordability of Paid Leave

Ensuring that leave is adequately paid can significantly affect gender equity in leave-taking and leave accessibility by lower-wage workers.

- Wage replacement rates are highest for paid leave reserved for fathers: 83% of countries with paid leave reserved for fathers guarantee full or nearly full wages. However, this leave is often quite short.
- 75% of countries with paid leave reserved for mothers guarantee a wage replacement rate of 80% of wages or more.
- Only 24% of countries with shared parental leave guarantee at least 80% of wages. Low wage replacement rates may discourage the higher-earning parent from taking paid leave.

Are more countries guaranteeing at least 14 weeks of paid leave to mothers and fathers of infants?



Job Protection during Leave

Along with adequate pay during leave, guaranteeing that parents can return to their jobs after leave is critical to women's employment outcomes and families' economic wellbeing.

- Nearly all countries with paid leave reserved for mothers (93%) or shared parental leave (90%) guarantee a worker taking leave will have the same or a similar job back upon return to work, prohibit discriminatory dismissal while on leave, or prohibit the dismissal of parents of young children.
- However, only 43% of countries reserving paid leave for fathers/partners specifically ensure job protection while on leave.

Breastfeeding Breaks

While there are a range of barriers to continuing to breastfeed after returning to work, providing new mothers breaks to nurse or express milk during the workday is one important first step.

- 72% of countries guarantee that women who have returned to work can take paid breaks for nursing or pumping during the workday until their child is at least 6 months old.
- An additional 2% of countries provide unpaid breaks for this purpose.

Paid Leave for Adoptive Parents

In some countries, adoptive parents are ineligible for paid leave or have access only to a reduced amount of leave.

- 53% of countries provide paid leave for families after the birth of a child but not after the adoption of a child.
- Among those countries that provide paid leave for adoptive families, many provide adoptive families with similar amounts of leave as birth families when excluding the duration of leave that pregnant women are able to take before birth.

In some countries, adoption leave also reinforces gender stereotypes in caregiving.

- In 14 countries, only women can take paid adoption leave in two-parent families.
- An additional 7 countries provide less leave to adoptive fathers than to adoptive mothers.

Paid Leave for Informal, Part-Time, and Self-Employed Workers

A range of countries have shown the feasibility of providing paid leave to informal, part-time, and self-employed workers.

- Over 1/3 of countries explicitly guarantee paid maternal leave to domestic workers; over 1/4 do so for agricultural workers.

- Over 1/2 of countries cover the self-employed, generally by structuring their paid parental leave programs as social insurance.
- More than 1/3 of countries explicitly cover part-time workers without a minimum number of hours or those working less than a quarter of full-time hours, and only 2% require workers to be working at least half-time to be eligible. No country explicitly excludes all part-time workers.

Additional Resources

Conducted by WORLD and with colleagues, the following studies examine the health impacts of extending paid maternity leave:

- [Full study](#): "Association of Increased Duration of Legislated Paid Maternity Leave with Childhood Diarrhoea Prevalence in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries: Difference-In-Differences Analysis"
- [Brief & full study](#): "Does Extending the Duration of Legislated Paid Maternity Leave Improve Breastfeeding Practices? Evidence from 38 Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries"
- [Brief & full study](#): "Increased Duration of Paid Maternity Leave Lowers Infant Mortality in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Quasi-Experimental Study"
- [Brief & full study](#): "Paid Maternity Leave and Childhood Vaccination Uptake: Longitudinal Evidence from 20 Low- and Middle-Income Countries"

In addition to guaranteeing that new parents can take paid leave, increasing the availability and affordability of both childcare and early childhood education (ECE) can powerfully shape women's work outcomes and support children's healthy development. For information about what steps countries are—and are not—taking to facilitate families' access to childcare and ECE, see:

- [Chapter 6, *Equality within Our Lifetimes: How Laws and Policies Can Close—or Widen—Gender Gaps in Economies Worldwide*](#) (Jody Heymann, Aleta Sprague, and Amy Raub; University of California Press, 2023)

Children's health needs continue well beyond infancy, and it is essential to ensure that workers can take paid leave to both provide care and access treatment or preventive care. For information about national laws and policies on paid leave for children's health needs, including their global prevalence and important limitations, see:

- [Chapter 6, *Equality within Our Lifetimes: How Laws and Policies Can Close—or Widen—Gender Gaps in Economies Worldwide*](#) (Jody Heymann, Aleta Sprague, and Amy Raub; University of California Press, 2023)
- Fact sheet: "[Paid Leave for Children's Health Needs](#)"
- Brief: "[Paid Leave for Family Health Needs](#)"

Work is forthcoming on the global quality and nature of paid parental leave coverage for all families including single parents, same-sex couples, and grandparent-headed families.

The **WORLD Policy Analysis Center (WORLD)** aims to improve the quantity and quality of globally comparative data on policies affecting health, development, well-being, and equity. With these data, WORLD informs policy debates; facilitates comparative studies of policy progress, feasibility, and effectiveness; and advances efforts to hold decision-makers accountable.

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