



COMMENTARY

# Supporting women during motherhood and caregiving necessary, but not sufficient: The need for men to become equal partners in childcare

Ivona Hideg<sup>1\*</sup>, Anja Krstic<sup>2</sup>, Deborah M. Powell<sup>3</sup>, and Yujie Zhan<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Schulich School of Business, York University, 111 Ian Macdonald Boulevard, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada, <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada, <sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, 50 Stone Rd. E, Guelph, ON N1G 2W1, Canada and <sup>4</sup>Lazaridis School of Business & Economics, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5, Canada

\*Corresponding author: Email: [ihideg@schulich.yorku.ca](mailto:ihideg@schulich.yorku.ca)

The timely focal article by Gabriel et al. (2023) spotlighted critical issues that women academics face around fertility, pregnancy, motherhood, and caregiving. We add to this perspective by arguing that it is not sufficient to only focus on women during motherhood and caregiving, and that for women to truly succeed in academia (and beyond) we need men to become equal partners in childcare, alleviating the burden placed mostly on women. We thus aim to highlight that childcare is not only a women's issue but rather a parents' issue. Positioning childcare and caregiving as a women's issue risks perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes. Instead, bringing men into the picture provides both men and women with greater opportunities to succeed in both work and family domains.<sup>1</sup> We therefore argue that, in addition to supporting women during motherhood and caregiving, traditional gender stereotypes need to be challenged, and men should be encouraged and provided with pathways to become equal partners during these critical periods. This, we believe, can in turn help change the norms surrounding childcare and performance cultures in academia, which are not aligned with caregiving.

Although we argue that solely focusing on mothers as caregivers is insufficient, we acknowledge that it is reasonable that the focal article focuses on women, given that it is based on experiences of women faculty in the United States where basic needs for mothers such as mandated paid parental leaves do not exist. In presenting our arguments below, we also note we are women academics working at Canadian universities, and thus we bring the Canadian perspective to this commentary. By doing so, we highlight that while the experiences described in the focal article are similar for women across the globe, there are also differences across countries. Given that our commentary is rooted in the Canadian context, which critically differs from the US in terms of policies, we first present a brief description of the Canadian context.

---

The last three authors have made equal contributions and are listed alphabetically. The work on this commentary was supported in part by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Grant (#435-2019-0154) awarded to Ivona Hideg.

<sup>1</sup>Although we focus on women and men as partners in raising children, we recognize that other family configurations exist, and we believe that our arguments for degendering caregiving and consequently changing norms surrounding childcare and aligning performance standards with childcare stand to benefit all families and all parents.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

### Canadian parental leave and caregiving context

Unlike the US, which is the only OECD country with no nationally mandated paid parental leave, Canada has a nationally paid parental leave policy that provides parents with up to 18 months of parental leave. These 18 months consist of a 3-month maternity leave to which only the birthing parent is entitled, and up to a 15-month parental leave that can be shared between parents in any way they wish. The policy thus appears very progressive as it offers leaves to both mothers and fathers, a point to which we return below.

Given these differences in national policy, experiences with pregnancy and parental leaves tend to be different for women academics in Canada and other countries that provide national parental leaves (e.g., many European countries). First, taking these leaves is highly normative for women, meaning that their existence is widely known and that women, including women academics, commonly take them and appreciate them—including this author team, who has greatly benefitted from such leaves. Having a mandated national policy also means that responsibility for ensuring leaves does not rest with department heads. It also means that women academics do not need to worry, for example, that they will need to teach shortly after giving birth or that there are expectations for any work during this leave, as presented in the focal article. But here comes the caveat as well—although Canadian parental leaves are touted as progressive and gender neutral, allowing both parents to take such leaves, it is mostly women who take them (Government of Canada, 2022). The key issue with this imbalance is that it again perpetuates stereotypes of women as caregivers and childcare as a women-only issue. Thus, although we bring the Canadian perspective, our arguments in this commentary are not restricted to any specific country. Importantly, we call for actions to challenge traditional gender stereotypes by moving beyond the sole focus on women when it comes to childcare-related support and bringing men into the picture.

### Sole focus on mothers as caregivers perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes

Women are traditionally stereotyped as warm, nurturing, and caregiving, whereas men are traditionally stereotyped as ambitious, competent, and dedicated to their work (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). These traditional gender stereotypes undermine women at work, as traditional feminine traits are seen as incongruent with the traits required for success in professional and leadership roles where more masculine traits are valued (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Thus, women academics are less likely to be seen as scholarly experts and leaders in their fields. Moreover, becoming mothers, taking time off for childcare, and more broadly taking on childcare exacerbates traditional stereotypes of women in which they are seen as very communal but not very agentic—and hence not very career dedicated and ambitious (Hideg *et al.*, 2018).

By solely focusing on women as caregivers and emphasizing childcare as their unique role, we stand to perpetuate and reinforce these damaging stereotypes of women's communality and lack of ambition. In fact, a large body of research has consistently shown that women who take longer parental leaves (one year and longer) in developed economies incur career penalties (Lequien, 2012; Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017). This is not to say that parental leaves and other pregnancy and early childhood accommodations should not be provided to women; indeed, they are absolutely necessary, but they need to be complemented with a focus on engaging men with childcare and seeing childcare as a parenting matter in which men are equal partners.

Notably, contrary to the impacts of parental leaves on women, some research suggests that men who take parental leaves do not seem to incur career penalties (Fleischmann & Sieverding, 2015) and may also experience some positive outcomes (Kmec *et al.*, 2014). Yet, there does not seem to be a well-established norm for fathers to use parental leaves. We argue that broader changes in norms are needed surrounding parental leaves and caregiving, and, relatedly, an equal emphasis on the necessity for men to receive similar accommodations and support. Encouraging men to take on greater caregiving responsibilities may be critical for normalizing the practice of doing

so for both women and men, and, importantly, reduce the chances that caregivers experience career repercussions, a point that we expand upon below.

### **Sole focus on women does not address the issue of performance cultures not being aligned with caregiving**

A sole focus on motherhood does not address performance cultures that favor academics with no or very few caregiving demands. It is true that parental leaves and tenure clock extensions provide additional time for women who had children to produce a certain number of required publications for tenure. However, what academic performance standards do not take into account is that a parental leave is just the beginning of a parenthood journey; children and caregiving demands do not go away once the parental leave or tenure clock extension is over. Indeed, as most parents know, the early childhood years are a time of extreme demands on parents, and, as the focal article notes, women faculty with children spend more time on childcare than men faculty; yet, they are still expected to publish and produce at the same rate as their peers who have no children or whose caregiving demands may be much lighter.

The favoritism of workers with few caregiving demands in performance systems is not unique to academia and is rooted in deep-seated ideologies of men as breadwinners who work extra hard to provide for their families, whereas women are expected to be primary caregivers and dedicate themselves less to their careers (Padavic et al., 2020). Focusing only on women academics as caregivers thus does not challenge, but rather reinforces, these ideas that men's primary duty is to be breadwinners, contributing to long-hours performance cultures. As such, long-hours performance cultures do not get challenged.

Yet, recent research shows that long-hours work cultures and devaluing work–family balance when setting performance standards is hurting both women and men (Padavic et al., 2020). Stalled career advancements for women have been seen as a necessary outcome of women's family obligations. Meanwhile, men also experience work–family conflict and indeed have a desire to be more involved with their families and to be afforded with family friendly policies (Harrington et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the hurtful long-hours performance cultures and standards will not change by focusing on women only as caregivers, given that there is an expectation that women should be responsible for caregiving at home, whereas men should dedicate long hours to careers. As such, having men become equal partners in caregiving may start to tip the scale and change the norms surrounding performance standards and foster new norms where work–life balance for all is truly encouraged and valued. For example, having women and men academics with children being equally engaged and associated with childcare would reduce gender gaps in CVs, which we are hoping may lead to re-evaluating our current performance standards as now we have a large population of academics being caregivers at some point in their lives. In other words, degendering caregiving may play an important role in gender equity by changing performance cultures that stand to hurt both women and men.

### **How policy making and departments can play a role in equalizing caregiving**

We believe that policy making both at the national and institutional level, and departmental support stand to play a key role in shifting norms surrounding childcare. One way to start this shift, from a policy perspective, is to offer men equal family benefits as women, including access to parental leaves—as that signals that men should and can be equal caregivers as women. However, just offering a leave does not mean that men will take it. For example, only 24% of Canadian fathers take any amount of parental leave (Government of Canada, 2022). Not using the leave perpetuates stereotypes that women are the main caregivers and users of such leaves. One solution is offering parental leaves to men that are nontransferable to women and encouraging

men to take them (Hideg & Priesemuth, 2021). This would normalize leave taking as a practice in which both men and women engage. Critically, research shows that men who take parental leaves become equal partners in caregiving in the long term (Rehel, 2013).

Policy making, however, can go only so far without adequate support from departments, and particularly department heads. Clearly, in addition to the policy that makes parental leaves available to men, it is equally important to encourage the actual use of parental leaves. That is, it is important to create a culture where men are encouraged and supported in taking parental leaves and, more broadly, in being actively engaged with their children. To do so, department heads should discuss parental leaves and childcare needs equally with both women and men faculty members. This will send a clear signal about the support for such leaves and needs, and help all faculty members to view them as a regular practice. These conversations will ensure that both women and men faculty feel comfortable asking questions regarding support for caregiving demands as outlined in the focal article, such as whether they can avoid certain teaching times or be excused for certain events due to their childcare needs. In addition, when it comes to performance evaluations, a culture needs to be created in which taking parental leaves and engaging in childcare is not penalized. Parental leaves and tenure clock extensions provide additional time for those who had children to produce required publications for tenure, but childcare demands are ongoing and such policies are not enough. This is where department heads stand to make a difference by creating an inclusive and supportive environment but also an environment where caregiving is seen as a parents' and not a mothers' issue.

Critical, however, is clearly communicating and setting expectations about what parental leaves and other caregiving accommodations are used for, as unfortunately misuse can happen. For example, one of the authors of this commentary interviewed human resource departments at several Canadian universities and found instances in which men academics would take parental leaves to boost their research productivity rather than to engage in caregiving as they were more likely to have stay-at-home partners compared to women academics. We do not intend to indicate this is prevalent, but rather to highlight that misuse can happen; indeed, many of our men colleagues and/or collaborators became highly engaged caregivers thanks to their parental leaves. However, research shows that a well-intended and supposedly gender-neutral policy of tenure-clock stopping when faculty have a child favors men, as women were more likely to use it for caregiving and men were more likely to use it for additional research (Manchester *et al.*, 2013). As such, department heads stand to play a critical role by supporting men to take available leaves and other accommodations but also by ensuring that such leaves are not used in ways that are not intended to further perpetuate gaps between women and men.

### **What can professional societies and academia do better to support caregiving?**

Professional societies and academia at large also need to join the effort of changing the norms of how we support parents. For example, looking at the criteria for SIOP's Early Career Contributions focusing on an academic's accomplishments within 7 years post PhD (primary years for starting a family), there is no mention of taking into account parental leaves or other career gaps. Indeed, only seven women academics have received that award in 30 years! It needs to become normative to assess our colleagues' work in light of career interruptions, and it should be normative for both men and women to include career interruptions on their CV. This way, women scholars will likely be receiving more opportunities for awards and funding, and men academics will perhaps be more willing to become an equal partner in childcare.

Journals and editors also play an important role in furthering this cause by, for example, enacting policies that allow for flexibility (e.g., extensions) during the review process, as this can help alleviate the pressure on academics who have caregiving responsibilities. Many of the (top-tier) journals in our field, and their editorial board members, are based in the US, and many do not take into account longer parental leaves in other countries. This means that many academics outside of the US are having to work during their parental leaves, which is meant to be used as job-protected time off to care for and bond with one's child(ren). Overall, significant changes are needed in our field to take into account caregiving demands, which may serve to not only benefit women academics but also incentivize men academics to take on more substantial caregiving roles if they see that they are less likely to experience negative career consequences for doing so.

## Conclusion

By focusing solely on women as caregivers, we risk perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes in which caregiving is only a women's issue. In this commentary, we argue that to make significant and lasting changes that will further gender equity in our field, we need to encourage men to become equal caregivers. To do so, we must rethink how policies and norms within our field can be changed so that childcare by both parents is normalized and accepted, and, importantly, so that our performance cultures become better aligned with caregiving.

## References

- Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, *109*(3), 573–598. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.109.3.573>
- Fleischmann, A., & Sieverding, M. (2015). Reactions toward men who have taken parental leave: Does the length of parental leave matter? *Sex Roles*, *72*(9–10), 462–476. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0469-x>
- Gabriel, A. S., Allen, T. D., Devers, C. E., Eby, L. T., Gilson, L. L., Hebl, M., Kehoe, R. R., . . . Rosen, C. C. (2023). A call to action: Taking the untenable out of women professors' pregnancy, postpartum, and caregiving demands. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *16*(2).
- Government of Canada. (2022). 2020/2021 Employment insurance monitoring and assessment report. Retrieved from [https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/documents/programs/ei/ei-list/reports/monitoring2021/2020-2021\\_EI\\_MAR-EN.pdf](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/esdc-edsc/documents/programs/ei/ei-list/reports/monitoring2021/2020-2021_EI_MAR-EN.pdf)
- Harrington, B., Lawler McHugh, T., & Sabatini Fraone, J. (2019). Expanded paid parental leave: Measuring the impact of leave on work & family. Boston College Center for Work & Family. Retrieved from <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/cwf/research/publications/researchreports/Expanded%20Paid%20Parental%20Leave-%20Study%20Findings%20FINAL%2010-31-19.pdf>
- Hideg, I., Krstic, A., Trau, R. N. C., & Zarina, T. (2018). The unintended consequences of maternity leaves: How agency interventions mitigate the negative effects of longer legislated maternity leaves. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *103*(10), 1155–1164. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000327>
- Hideg, I., & Priesemuth, M. (2021). 3 ways companies could offer more father-friendly policies that will help women. The Conversation. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/3-ways-companies-could-offer-more-father-friendly-policies-that-will-help-women-154155>
- Kmec, J. A., Huffman, M. L., & Penner, A. M. (2014). Being a parent or having a parent? The perceived employability of men and women who take employment leave. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *58*(3), 453–472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213503338>
- Lequien, L. (2012). The impact of parental leave duration on later wages. *Annals of Economics and Statistics*, *(107/108)*, 267–285. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23646579>
- Manchester, C. F., Leslie, L. M., & Kramer, A. (2013). Is the clock still ticking? An evaluation of the consequences of stopping the tenure clock. *ILR Review*, *66*(1), 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001979391306600101>
- Olivetti, C., & Petrongolo, B. (2017). The economic consequences of family policies: Lessons from a century of legislation in high-income countries. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *31*(1), 205–230. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2907247>

- Padavic, I., Ely, R. J., & Reid, E. M.** (2020). Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: The work–family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **65**(1), 61–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839219832310>
- Rehel, E. M.** (2013). When dad stays home too: Paternity leave, gender, and parenting. *Gender & Society*, **28**(1), 110–132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213503900>
- Rudman, L. A., Moss-Racusin, C. A., Phelan, J. E., & Nauts, S.** (2012). Status incongruity and backlash effects: Defending the gender hierarchy motivates prejudice against female leaders. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **48**(1), 165–179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2011.10.008>

---

**Cite this article:** Hideg, I., Krstic, A., Powell, D. M., & Zhan, Y. (2023). Supporting women during motherhood and caregiving necessary, but not sufficient: The need for men to become equal partners in childcare. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **16**, 215–220. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2023.12>