



## 70<sup>th</sup> UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70)

### Parental Leave in Law and Practice: Enhancing Women's Equity and Global Development

*Summary report of the event held on 11 March 2026 in New York*

#### The Vital Role of Parental Leave in Gender Equity and Global Development

Farah Arabe, MMM Board Member and Representative at the United Nations in New York, introduced the panel and its objectives.

Parental leave, encompassing **maternity**, **paternity**, and **shared parental leave**, is a pivotal legal mechanism that advances **women's equity**, **maternal mental health**, **economic opportunity**, and **equitable care distribution** at home and in society. This topic is particularly significant within the framework of **inclusive and equitable legal systems**.

Parental leave not only supports women's equity but also, through the **mother-child dyad**, functions as a cornerstone for **global development**. Importantly, the discussion must move beyond legislation alone to examine **implementation** and the lived experiences of families worldwide.

#### The Health and Developmental Impacts of Parental Leave

**Dr. Elizabeth Werner of Columbia University's Center for the Transition to Parenthood** detailed the **physiological, psychological, and economic stakes** during the transition to parenthood, highlighting **perinatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMADs)** as a critical health concern.

- PMADs affect **8-26%** of birthing people worldwide, with anxiety symptoms reported in **15-24%** during pregnancy and postpartum.
- Consequences of untreated PMADs include:
  - Increased suicide rates among affected parents
  - Negative impacts on **physical health**, **occupational stability**, and **homelessness risk**
  - Impaired **infant growth**, **breastfeeding duration**, and **child cognitive and behavioral development**
  - Disrupted **family dynamics**, with increased relationship conflict and financial instability

- The **economic burden** of untreated PMADs in the US is estimated at **\$14 billion annually** over the first five postpartum years, factoring healthcare costs, lost productivity, and child developmental impacts.
- Parental leave, especially **paid leave**, mitigates these risks by:
  - Reducing mood symptoms and improving parental health
  - Supporting longer breastfeeding duration
  - Enhancing mother-child attachment and infant health outcomes (vaccination rates, mortality reduction).
  - Promoting **equitable caregiving roles** and **relationship satisfaction**.
  - Increasing **economic security**, particularly for low-income and marginalised families, reducing poverty risk.

Dr. Werner concluded that parental leave is among the few policies with **multigenerational, long-lasting societal benefits**, making it an indispensable tool for health, equity, and economic stability.

## Global Legal Landscape of Parental Leave

Julia Braunmiller from the World Bank presented findings from the **2026 Women, Business and the Law report<sup>1</sup>**, analysing parental leave laws in **190 countries**.

- Globally, women have only **two-thirds** of the economic rights of men; no country grants full legal equality; only 4% approach near equality
- Parenthood creates a significant career disruption for women, despite similar educational attainment and entrepreneurship rates
- **123 countries** provide at least **98 days (14 weeks)** of paid maternity leave, meeting the **ILO standard**; however, **six countries** still offer **zero paid leave** for mothers
- **62 countries** offer at least **14 days of paid paternity leave**—about one-third worldwide—but this remains significantly shorter than maternity leave durations, sustaining gender care disparities
- Closing the gap between maternity and paternity leave correlates with increased female labour force participation
- Governments are increasingly providing **job protection** and **financial incentives** (e.g., Korea offers three extra months if parents take leave simultaneously or sequentially)
- Only **50 countries** publish **sex-disaggregated data** on care work, limiting policy effectiveness
- Recent reforms include paternity leave introduction or extension in countries like Egypt, Madagascar, Somalia, Korea, and Uruguay
- The trend is moving toward **government-funded social insurance** models, reducing the burden on employers and encouraging equitable hiring

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<sup>1</sup> Available on <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>

## Social Norms, Masculinity, and Parental Leave Uptake

**Jose Campi Portaluppi from Equimundo** explored **social norms and masculinity** as factors influencing parental leave uptake, particularly among men.

- Media often portrays fathers as **incompetent caregivers** (e.g., American sitcom tropes), reinforcing stereotypes that undermine men's caregiving roles.
- Evidence shows men are naturally **wired to care** and desire active parenting roles, willing even to sacrifice economic opportunities for caregiving time
- Despite this, **rigid gender norms** — conceptualised as the “**manbox**” — create barriers: men fear ridicule or being perceived as weak if they take leave
- Anecdotes reveal men declining leave due to workplace stigma and lack of understanding
- Equimundo's approach emphasises:
  - **Starting early** with children to shape gender norms
  - **Changing narratives** in media to represent positive caregiving male role models
  - **Allyship** and showing men how gender equality benefits them, addressing feelings of instrumentalization
- The political spectrum shows **bipartisan support** for parental leave, reflecting broad societal acceptance despite polarisation

## Labour Market Dynamics and Career Breaks

**Sarah Steinberg of LinkedIn** provided data-driven insights on **career breaks** and their impact on women's labour market participation and advancement.

- Women are **30% more likely** than men to report career breaks, mostly for parenting; men's breaks are often for professional development
- Women's career breaks tend to be longer than men's and occur earlier (about 9 years into careers)
- Career breaks have profound, lasting effects on women's earnings and leadership advancement; women hold less than **one-third of leadership roles globally**, with recent stagnation since 2022
- Critical career drop-off points for women align with **family formation stages**, including transition to first managerial roles
- Economic slowdowns exacerbate gender disparities: women apply more for leadership during downturns but are hired less frequently
- Enhancing **care infrastructure** and parental leave policies is essential not only for fairness but for **economic growth and competitiveness** by fully utilising the workforce's potential

## National Care Systems and Inclusive Policy: Uruguay's Experience

**Dr. Valentina Perrota from Uruguay's Ministry of Social Development** emphasised parental leave as part of a **broader national care system**.

- Uruguay's progressive model includes:
  - **Parental leave as a complement**, not replacement, to care services
  - Non-transferable, **paid parental leave for fathers** that enables them to become primary caregivers, transforming gender roles and fostering empathy
- Evidence from Europe shows that fathers taking extended leave experience exhaustion and full caregiving challenges, reshaping their identity and increasing shared responsibilities post-leave
- Uruguay's reforms: maternity leave extended to 14 weeks, paternity leave to be extended to 20 days, and shared parental leave options – though uptake remains low due to cultural factors like breastfeeding obligations
- Current social dialogue seeks to standardise care leave rights for **formal, informal, and private sector workers**, addressing inequalities
- Emphasises need to view care as a **public good** and part of social protection, including quality regulation of care workers
- Advocates for holistic care policies that consider all family types and caregiving needs beyond childbirth

## Local Government Leadership and the New York City Example

**New York City Commissioner Aissata Camara** provided a real-world case study illustrating how local governments enact and expand parental leave policies. Her premise: "Cities turn commitment to action. Cities make policies real."

- New York City implemented **paid parental leave for municipal employees in 2016**, becoming an early adopter in the United States. This initiative was rooted in the principle that **government should lead by example**.
- The city further bolstered support through **paid safe and sick leave policies** and major investments in **early childhood education** (free full-day Pre-K for four-year-olds, expansion of 3K and 2K programs). These efforts help mothers return to work and contribute economically.
- New York City also promotes **gender equity** through programs supporting women entrepreneurs and removing workplace barriers for caregivers via the **Women Forward NYC** strategy.
- Commissioner Camara emphasised three critical lessons from the city's experience:
  1. **Implementation matters**: Policies are effective only if families can access them through coordinated outreach and agency partnerships.

2. **Culture matters:** Workplace stigma and societal norms often discourage both fathers and mothers from taking leave; changing this requires cultural shifts alongside policy reform.
  3. **Equity matters:** Families most in need often face the greatest hurdles in accessing benefits, necessitating targeted efforts to ensure inclusivity.
- NYC’s international cooperation, including a Memorandum of Understanding with UN Women, shows cities’ roles in shaping global gender equity discourse.

Commissioner Camara’s closing argument: **“Supporting parents is not a cost to society; it is one of the most important investments we can make in our future”.**

### **Challenges and Emerging Issues: Inclusion, Payment, and AI**

The discussion with the audience addressed pressing challenges and innovations:

- **Inclusion:** With 60% of the global workforce informal, marginalised groups face exclusion from parental leave and social protections. Solutions require leveling the playing field through gender equality in rights, investments in affordable, quality childcare, and social protection reforms
- **Payment adequacy:** Extended leaves often pay only a portion of prior earnings (e.g., Canada’s 55% for standard leave, 33% for extended), creating financial barriers, especially for lower-income workers. Uptake among men remains low when payments are insufficient, as seen in the UK where only 5% of eligible men use statutory parental leave
- **Administrative burdens:** Complicated reimbursement processes hinder access; simplified online applications are a needed policy shift
- **AI and workforce continuity:** Emerging questions concern whether AI can substitute for workers on leave or assist in job security during parental leave. Current examples focus on AI platforms to facilitate access to parental leave services rather than replacement
- **Skills recognition:** Advocacy for recognising caregiving as skill-building (e.g., multitasking, empathy, etc.) and incorporating these into professional profiles to reduce career penalties associated with leave. LinkedIn supports a shift to skills-based hiring reflecting diverse experiences
- **Cultural challenges:** Social media’s idealised portrayals of postpartum life can harm mental health by setting unrealistic expectations, underscoring the need for authentic narratives and choice in caregiving roles
- **Cross-sector collaboration:** Effective parental leave implementation requires coordinated efforts among governments, researchers, private sector, and civil society to innovate and disseminate evidence-based policies

## **Conclusion: Parental Leave as a Cornerstone of Gender Equity and Societal Prosperity**

Parental leave policies represent a **transformative legal and social tool** that addresses gender inequities, supports maternal and child health, fosters equitable caregiving, and strengthens economic participation and growth.

The multifaceted approach – from local government leadership (New York City), academic research on health impacts (Columbia University), global legal benchmarking (World Bank), to social norm transformation (Equimundo) – demonstrates that parental leave effectiveness depends on integrated policy design, robust implementation, cultural change, and inclusive access.

Investments in parental leave and the broader **national care infrastructure** are not costs but critical investments in the future workforce, family well-being, and societal resilience.

The ongoing challenges of informal workforce inclusion, payment adequacy, stigma, and emerging technological shifts require continued innovation and cross-sector collaboration.

Ultimately, how societies support parents and caregivers reflects **core values** and determines the opportunities available to the next generation.

This event offered a rich, multidisciplinary dialogue on parental leave, framing it as an economic imperative, a social good, and a catalyst for gender justice, and underscoring its critical role in building **equitable, inclusive, and prosperous societies** globally.