

Assessing and measuring the impacts of parental leave policies: intersectionality, policy entanglements, and conceptual and methodological complexities

This special issue focuses on the designs, implementations and impacts of parental leave policies and the conceptual and methodological complexities involved in assessing, measuring and theorizing those designs. Many countries are undergoing accelerated processes of neoliberalism and “financialized capitalism” (Fraser, 2016, p. 100), with social protections for workers weakening and precarious and nonstandard employment arrangements becoming increasingly common (e.g. Hewison, 2016; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2012). Consequently, there is an urgent need, now, at the beginning of a new decade, for wider, deeper and more nuanced thinking about how parental leave benefits help mitigate or exacerbate social inequalities. Each article in this special issue expands the contemporary debate on parental leave and gendered power and inequalities by engaging with intersectional analyses and exploring the methodological complexities of assessing and measuring progressive social change. The issue also aims to reimagine work/care policies that could lead to more equitable and just social worlds.

The interdisciplinary contributions in this special issue are based on papers that were presented at the 15th Annual Seminar of the International Network on Leave Policies and Research (LP&R), held in Toronto, Canada, in July 2018. The LP&R was established in 1998 by Peter Moss (United Kingdom) and Fred Deven (Belgium). What began as a small group of mainly European colleagues slowly expanded into the leading international research organization and the most widely used source of information on parental leave policies and research. Focused on cutting edge international research on family leave policies (mainly parental leave, maternity leave and paternity leave, but other kinds of family leaves as well), the network is now made up of more than 60 members from 40 countries around the globe. It has also hosted an annual international symposium every year since 2004. While Moss and Deven were co-coordinators of the network between 1998 and 2015, and remain as honorary founding members, the current coordinators of the network are Margaret O'Brien (United Kingdom) and Ann-Zofie Duvander (Sweden).

The Seminar papers selected for this special issue are based on international case studies and comparative papers with diverse conceptual, theoretical, epistemological and methodological approaches to parental leave policies. A wide range of interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches – including critical, feminist and intersectional analyses – appears in these papers, which showcase international work by leading and emergent scholars. The papers focus on research conducted on the European Union, Sweden, Norway, Canada, Brazil and 21 European former socialist countries (EFSCs) by authors from Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden and the United Kingdom. While this Special Issue was completed before the onset of the 2020 pandemic, we believe that the concerns raised in these articles about equity and social inclusion in policy design are more relevant than ever.

The first paper in this collection is coauthored by Peter Moss and Fred Deven, who are not only cofounders of the LP&R but also who remain as leading international voices on parental



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leave and childcare policies. This is their third coauthored piece that gives an overview of the state of international leave policies as well as current and future research directions (see [Deven and Moss, 2002](#); [Moss and Deven, 2015](#)). Along with two coedited books on parental leave policies produced by the LP&R ([Kamerman and Moss, 2009](#); [Moss et al., 2019](#)), Moss and Deven's work has made critical intellectual and policy contributions on the current state and future possibilities for parental leave policies. In this issue, their article "Leave Policies in Europe: Current policies, future directions" reviews both national and regional developments and variations in European legislation on leave policies, stretching from 1883 to the present day. Laying out several possibilities, such as overturning the dominant view of leave policy as an employment right by reconceiving it as a universal right to care, their contribution inspires thoughtful debate on potential future directions for leave policy.

In their paper entitled "Fathering, parental leave, impacts, and gender equality: What/how are we measuring?", Andrea Doucet and Lindsey McKay (two of Canada's four representatives in the LP&R) investigate how to assess the impacts of parental leave on fathering involvement and gender equality. Informed by a 10-year Canadian longitudinal qualitative research study of families with fathers who took relatively long parental leaves, they argue that the relationship between fathers' leave-taking and gender equality, both conceptually and at the level of everyday practice, is complex and multifaceted. Some of these relational dimensions include attending to leave eligibility, benefit levels, wage replacement rates, the financial dimensions of leave-taking combined with childcare possibilities/limitations in the postleave period, masculine work norms in workplaces and intersections of gender and class. Doucet and McKay call for more attention to be given to the genealogies and relationalities of the concepts and practices of care and equality that guide parental leave research and policy as well as to the historical and sociocultural specificity of the Universal Caregiver model.

In "Designing parental leave for fathers: Promoting gender equality in working life," coauthors Elin Kvande and Berit Brandth, the Norwegian representatives in the LP&R, analyze the interconnections between Norway's father's quota, its specific design and its impacts on gender equality in work life. Their article is informed by a qualitative research study with Norwegian fathers who have used the father's quota, a paternity leave benefit policy that has been in place for fathers for more than a quarter century. It provides critical lessons for other countries seeking to design policies that grapple with design issues of individualization, benefit levels and the nontransferability of benefits, as well as conceptual issues of balancing dual career families, care needs and ideal workers.

Ann-Zofie Duvander and Ida Viklund title their article with a question: "How long is a parental leave and for whom? An analysis of methodological and policy dimensions of leave length and division in Sweden." Working with administrative data, they explore the complex legislative issues and interconnections between leave lengths, paid and unpaid days and individual and household income for both mothers and fathers in the first two years of a Swedish child's life. They argue that it is important to develop methodological measures that map both paid and unpaid leaves and gender and social class implications and their multiple effects.

Ivana Dobrotić (the LP&R representative for Croatia) and Nada Stropnik (the LP&R representative for Slovenia) coauthored the article "Gender and parenting-related leaves in twenty-one former socialist countries." Their piece provides a historical comparative analysis of parenting-related leave policy reforms in the EFSCs between 1970 and 2018. They illuminate the historical development of leave policies, patterns in policy design and implementation, and the potential of these policies to reproduce, impede or transform gendered norms and inequalities in employment and in care work. The article discusses competing influences in policy implementation priorities across these countries, including traditional gendered norms, fertility incentives, gender equality and labor market participation goals, and

membership in the European Union (EU). Dobrotić and Stropnik also bring attention to the complicated intersectional dimensions of leave design and the methodological complexities of national comparative analysis.

Our final contribution in this special issue, coauthored by Alexandre Fraga and Bila Sorj (Brazil's LP&R representative), is "Leave policies and social inequality in Brazil." This piece provides a rare social policy analysis of Brazil's leave policies and social inequalities. Working with data from the Brazilian Annual National Continuous Household Sampling Survey of 2017, Fraga and Sorj conduct a historical and contemporary analysis of maternity leave and paternity leave legislation in Brazil. They conclude that in terms of access to leave policies, social inequalities (of gender, class, race and age) in Brazil are connected to the contributory schemes of maternity and paternity leave. The authors also reflect on the need for more public debate in Brazil on the possibility of making parental leaves a citizenship right for all parents rather than only for a select and privileged group.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* forms part of ongoing efforts to widen and deepen robust international policy conversations and debates on a wide range of empirical, policy, theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues involved in designing, implementing and evaluating parental leave policies. We are grateful for the support and leadership of the LP&R and its members for their ongoing interventions through scholarly and public writing. We also thank several LP&R members for reviewing the papers for this special issue and Jennifer Turner and Kate Paterson for assistance with managing submissions and copy editing. We hope that this special issue generates more fruitful debate that could lead to positive outcomes for parents, children, families and communities. These debates will be even more urgent in a post-pandemic world.

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