

# Policy Brief

Unpaid work leaves women at a disadvantage not only in workforce, but also in health



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Fall 2014





In the fall of 2014 the IHSP welcomed eleven McGill students from across the University for a 14-week Internship. Training sessions focused on communicating research findings to the media or general public, and gaining insight into different disciplinary approaches. In addition to in-depth research projects carried out in collaboration with faculty and staff, interns devoted ten to fifteen hours to short policy projects on a topic of their choice. Students were asked to frame an issue, find at least two points of supporting evidence and develop rudimentary policy recommendations. The following document reflects the short timeframe given to students to complete this task, and may not be a polished product.

*Please note the opinions reflected in this document do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.*

# UNPAID WORK LEAVES WOMEN AT A DISADVANTAGE NOT ONLY IN WORKFORCE, BUT ALSO IN HEALTH

## THE ISSUE

Statistical evidence demonstrates that women continue to earn less than men annually in Canada for paid work (19% on average). This is the case even though women have caught up with men in educational attainment. Despite the fact that the wage gap is diminishing, women take on more **unpaid** work. This has negative health impacts. Furthermore, more women work, but not necessarily full time. Women take on lower paid work like teaching or nursing to accommodate caregiving. They fall behind because of child-rearing. This results in an **earnings gap** between Canadian men and women.

**Stakeholders and actors involved:** government policy-makers, employers, labor unions and school admissions' offices

UNPAID WORK IS ANY WORK DONE THAT IS NOT PAID, INCLUDING CARING FOR CHILDREN, INFORMAL CARE-GIVING TO OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS, COOKING AND CLEANING AND OTHER HOUSEHOLD WORK SUCH AS SHOPPING FOR GOODS AND SERVICES.

Mandatory and equally-shared maternity and paternity leave should be provided to both men and women to encourage shared division of labor in the home, to maintain greater equality in the workforce and to close the earnings gap.

# CONTEXT: WHY IT MATTERS

## WOMEN SHOULDER THE BURDEN OF UNPAID WORK

- A 2008 Statistics Canada study showed while women and men work the same number of hours for pay each day, women spend almost **two hours more per day** on unpaid work.

## NEGATIVE HEALTH IMPACTS

- Chronically stressful environments, such as extensive work hours or overwhelming responsibilities, leads to burnout.

## DIFFICULT CHOICES

- Most often, women have to self-select between:
  - 1) Working full time, doing more unpaid work potentially leading to negative health impacts
  - 2) Making labor force choices that allow them to balance their caregiving responsibilities

Women have accounted for about 7 out of 10 part-time employees in Canada since the late 1970's.

*Statistics Canada (2009)*

**Canadian Economist Morley Gunderson has summarized the situation succinctly. Women are more likely to take on:**

- Reduced hours in the labour market
- Reduced mobility because of household ties
- Education that is less labour-market oriented
- Interruptions in labour-market careers
- Willingness to pay for workplace amenities that are family friendly

## **CURRENT BENEFITS FOR WORKING MOTHERS**

- Depending on the length of employment history and the hours worked, new mothers can take between 17 and 52 weeks of leave from their jobs.
- Either the mother or father can take 35 weeks of parental leave after the baby is born or adopted.
- The parents can share the leave however they choose.

### **HOWEVER:**

- Standardized maternity leave is not available to women in Canada. Time and benefits vary across provinces, regions and employers.

## **THE GOVERNMENT HAS A ROLE TO PLAY**

### **Government legislation CAN work:**

Follow the Icelandic model of nine-month parental leave divided into thirds: Three months are for the mother. Three non-transferable months are for the father and the three remaining months are for both parents to share. During the leave, parents receive 80% of their salary.

**This measure has proven to be effective in balancing of gender roles for many couples.**

## WHAT CAN MANDATORY MATERNITY AND PATERNITY LEAVE DO?

1. It can increase the number of fathers sharing domestic responsibility by being involved in their children's upbringing, resulting in less unpaid work for women.
2. It can equalize career impacts of taking time off work.

## LIMITATIONS

- Health effects might not directly be a result of unpaid work.
- The failure of this legislation to differentiate between full and part-time employees.
- Knowledge gaps still remain: the exact extent of health effects from unpaid work in Canada are unknown.
- A cultural shift is needed and it may prove to be difficult due to deeply-embedded traditional social norms.

**Policy change can help establish new norms.**

## SOURCES

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