[**Sharing responsibilities**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1758411/sharing-responsibilities)

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THE recently passed bill on maternity and paternity leave enables mothers to take up to six months on the first birth, and leaves of four and three months for the second and third children. This law also allows for the father to take three one-month leaves for the duration of the service during times of childbirth. This is the first-time paternal leave has been given legal protection and it holds pivotal importance for two significant reasons.

Firstly, it aims to ensure the continued presence of women in the workforce, and, secondly, it promotes the idea that childcare is a shared responsibility. Research has shown that countries with robust family leave policies experience higher female labour force participation rates, improved gender equality, and enhanced productivity. The PPP deserves credit for its efforts in promoting pro-women legislation and its ongoing commitment to progressive policies.

Maternity leave is a universal human and labour right. It is critical in securing the well-being, health, safety and economic fulfilment of women and their children.

Parental leave is, however, only a part of the picture. While maternity leave plays a critical role in supporting women’s paid work, the time and effort invested in care work often hinder their ability to work or progress in their careers. Care work encompasses domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and laundry, as well as the responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities.

Maternity and paternity leave can serve as catalysts for gender equality and productivity.

Care work is not only a social good but also the backbone of our economies. Without someone investing time and effort in home care, individuals engaged in paid work would struggle to perform effectively. However, globally, this responsibility is predominantly shouldered by women, who perform approximately three-quarters of unpaid care work. In South Asia, women perform nine times more unpaid care work than men on average.

According to the United Nations Development Programme, women in Pakistan spend an average of 4.4 hours per day on unpaid care work, including activities such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and caring for the elderly. Imagine spending 4.4 hours above your typical nine-to-five day!

In Pakistan, the responsibility of caring for children is traditionally seen as solely a woman’s role. Even when women engage in paid work, they still bear the responsibility of sustaining the household. In other words, their work is never-ending! The relentless nature of care work can exhaust women, leaving them with little time for themselves; this has adverse effects on their health.

The recent bill passed by the Senate is a step in the right direction. It is crucial to recognise that laws and policies have a significant impact on shaping social norms. Paternity leave, for instance, promotes the idea that childcare is a shared responsibility. As the next step, collective thinking is required on how to promote childcare as a public good and a collective responsibility. Given the alarming statistics shared on unequal care responsibilities, paternity leave can very well mean men using the leave for leisure. In the short run, some bare minimum paternalistic compliance stipulations might need to be added — for example, making it compulsory for men to register the birth of their child.

In parallel, legislators must work on building laws that prevent discrimination against women who are pregnant. One potential approach could involve ensuring that employers are not individually liable for the direct costs of maternity leave, and instead, these cash benefits should be provided through compulsory social insurance, public funds, or non-contributory social assistance for women. Addressing the risk of employer discrimination against female employees is critical, as there are costs associated with granting paid maternity leave. Additionally, legislators should consider extending these benefits to contractual and informal workers.

Beyond childcare, the conversation must focus on how care responsibilities can be shared among households, within communities, and with the support of the government and markets. In addition to having progressive policies, the state can focus on the provision of critical infrastructure and services such as roads to reduce commuting time, the establishment of schools, hospitals, child and elder care facilities, and community centres.

The market — or more broadly employers — also have a key role to play. Alongside the bill on maternity and paternity leave, the passage of a bill on mandatory childcare facilities in workplaces is a significant step forward. Employers need to facilitate women when they re-enter the workforce. Women should also be given breaks for breastfeeding and should be given a fair period to transition back to work.

Employers should also foster a family-friendly work environment by implementing flexible work arrangements, reduced working hours, part-time options with pro-rata benefits and entitlements, and leave for caring for children and other family members. Employers are likely to also benefit by creating provisions such as these in the form of improved employee morale, increased loyalty, reduced turnover, and enhanced recruitment prospects. By supporting work-life balance and family-friendly practices, companies can create a positive and inclusive work environment.

In these times of economic crisis, households are increasingly relying on two incomes. Men would need to step up and support women in childcare and care work and policies like paternity leave are critical in encouraging this change.

It is crucial for governments and employers in the private sector to listen to caregivers, a group that often lacks access to decision-making spaces. The voices of women’s groups and care workers are important and must be included in policymaking and investment planning processes to ensure that the concerns of caregivers are heard. With the right policies and investments in place, we can significantly reduce overall care responsibilities and distribute them more equitably across society.

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