

# Improved employment policies can encourage fathers to be more involved at home

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While the COVID-19 pandemic had many detrimental socio-economic and health impacts, one silver lining has been the influence of remote

work on men's involvement in unpaid work at home.

Since the first pandemic lockdowns in 2020, between 25 and 40 percent of the Canadian labor force has shifted to [working remotely](#). Evidence suggests [remote and hybrid work arrangements are here to stay](#); 80 percent of those who work remotely want to continue working at least several days per week at home.

[Our research](#) finds that Canadian fathers who worked remotely during the pandemic reported higher levels of involvement in household work and [child care](#). Remote work and other flexible work policies may play a crucial role in encouraging a more equitable distribution of household and care work within families.

Remote work isn't the only [policy](#) pathway that facilitates men's involvement at home. Our research finds that fathers who have previously taken parental leave report sharing a wider set of household work and child-care tasks with their partners.

But there is a catch: access to these policies is limited in ways that diminish their full potential. Part of the problem stems from the way parental leave and remote work policies are structured.

They are framed as employment policies rather than as care/work policies that can promote greater sharing of both paid and unpaid [care work](#) between parents. This framing limits access to both sets of policies.

## **Parental leave in Canada**

While Canada is regarded as a country with generous parental leave provisions, [especially when compared to the United States](#), its parental leave policies can be exclusionary.

Outside of Québec, parental leave programs have low wage replacement rates and restrictive eligibility criteria. Paternity leave is both low-paid (five to eight weeks at a 33 to 55 percent wage-replacement rate) and contingent on mothers (or birthing parents) also taking leave rather than being designed as an individual entitlement.

[These differences](#) exclude many low-income parents from receiving [parental leave benefits](#).

In addition, top-up wages are highly uneven throughout Canada. Some employers don't enhance the wage replacement rates for parental leave (70 to 75 percent in Québec and 33 to 55 percent in the rest of Canada).

Others, especially those in federally regulated industries, the [public sector](#) and large private sector companies, top-up wage replacement rates to as high as 93 percent. In many contexts, however, top-ups are limited solely to mothers, which disincentivizes fathers from taking parental leave.

## **Flexible work arrangements in Canada**

Flexible work arrangements have a less complex policy architecture than parental leave policies, but they share its drawback of uneven access. Aside from those who are self-employed, the decision-making power for remote work lies with employers.

As of December 2017, employees in all federally regulated sectors in Canada can [request a flexible work arrangement under the Canada Labor Code](#) after six months of continuous employment.

However, managers maintain the right to refuse requests for flexible work arrangements if they believe their use will be detrimental to the quality or quantity of an employee's work. This results in different

standards being applied to different employees and means that access depends on managers' opinions about remote work and its effect on productivity.

While there is no [clear-cut evidence](#) that working remotely hinders productivity, stereotypes of remote workers as unambitious persist [and prevent men and women](#) alike from gaining access.

## **Who benefits from these policies?**

Constraints around policy access and eligibility mean parental leave and remote work are set up to benefit those who already enjoy socio-economic privileges, such as those who receive hefty wage top-ups and those in high-ranking positions who don't need to worry about managerial biases.

To ensure more people benefit from parental leave and flexible work policies, our study suggests they must provide greater support for more people's work and care lives.

In terms of flexible work arrangements, the right to remote work should acknowledge the diverse caregiving needs and responsibilities of all individuals, including fathers. One step in this direction would be to frame flexible work policies as a human right available to all workers, [regardless of parental or gender status](#), to mitigate the stigma associated with working remotely and encourage widespread use.

When it comes to parental leave, the evidence is clear: from 2019 to 2020, [only 23.5 percent of recent fathers](#) living outside of Québec took (or intended to take) parental or [paternity leave](#), compared to 85.6 percent of fathers in Québec. If the rest of Canada adopted Québec's more inclusive policy framework, we could narrow the gendered gap in parental leave access.

While the COVID-19 pandemic created extraordinary uncertainty and unpredictability in employment, it also introduced new ways of thinking about [paid and unpaid work](#) and [how to support people's work and care lives](#).

If more Canadians are to harness the benefits of [parental leave](#) and [remote work](#), we need to design employment and care policies in ways that recognize individuals of all gender identities as not just workers, [but as caregivers and care receivers](#) throughout their lives.

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