

**Taking Paid Leave:  
The Role of Paid Parental Leave Benefits in the  
Alleviation of Role Overload of Working Mothers**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines ways to alleviate feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers in Canada through changes to the current paid parental leave policy. Although women have made great strides in labour market participation and career development since the 1970's, they are still maintaining the majority of childcare and household care activities, leading to difficulties balancing their roles of parent and employee. Using mothers' blog entries from parenting websites and a comparative case study analysis, this study argues that paid parental leave policies must encourage the equal contribution of fathers in childcare and household maintenance activities in order to reduce mothers' feelings of stress. Currently, the Parental Benefits program provides a period of parental leave, which may be shared by both parents; however, only 10% of Canadian fathers take a paid leave of absence upon the birth or adoption of a child. Policy recommendation includes: providing a six month period of non-transferable paternity leave in addition to six months of non-transferable leave for mothers and six months of shared leave; increased financial support through a higher earnings replacement and higher weekly benefit minimum.

**Keywords:** Paid parental leave; role overload; family policy; mothers

*To my friends and family.*

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## Glossary

Current: 'Current' refers to the provisions available to parents through the federal paid parental leave policy, inclusive of those changes made in 2010 to include the self-employed.

Paid parental leave benefits: This study focuses on the government provision of *paid* parental leave benefits, as opposed to *unpaid* parental leave benefits. Research shows that unpaid leave – as is available to parents in the US – does little to encourage leave-taking, and that a period of unpaid leave will not provide the same benefits to children and parents as will a paid leave of absence.

Alleviate: The goal of this research is to determine how improving Canada's paid parental leave policy might mitigate some of the time-related pressures experienced by working mothers. While some degree of time stress and financial sacrifice is inherent in the act of raising children, there are many benefits - both social and economic - to be had by reducing some of these pressures.

Working mothers: This research focuses on the pressures experienced by working mothers as opposed to mothers that choose not to have ties to the paid labour force. 'Working' refers to mothers that work both part-time and full-time hours, including the self-employed and contract workers.

Role overload: Role overload refers to the feeling of having too much to do in a given amount of time. The implications of role overload are discussed in further detail in the background section of this report.

## **Executive Summary**

Women's participation in the Canadian labour force has increased exponentially in the past four decades. Despite making great strides in the labour force, Canadian women still experience gender inequality in the home, as they continue to bear the majority of childcare and household maintenance responsibilities while simultaneously filling the role of income-earner. These dual pressures have led to an increasing incidence of role overload - the result of managing multiple roles in a given period of time - among Canadian working mothers, the result of managing multiple roles in a constrained time period. The implications of role overload are ongoing physical and emotional health problems and emotional disengagement from the workforce.

Well-formulated paid parental leave policies can effectively alleviate feelings of role overload by promoting gender equality in the home. The Canadian paid parental leave policy has failed to promote paternal involvement in the early years of childrearing, however, by not providing an adequate earnings replacement rate and length of leave to new parents. Moreover, the policy does not provide a paid paternity leave period to Canadian fathers, a feature that is essential to promoting gender equality in the home. Consequently, Canadian mothers are experiencing difficulty balancing multiple roles that include both caregiver and employee.

In this study, I explore ways to improve the current provision of paid leave benefits in order to reduce the incidence of role overload experienced by working mothers. Using data from both blog entries and case studies, I seek to address the following research questions: (1) why do working mothers in Canada experience role overload and (2) how can paid parental leave benefits alleviate feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers in Canada?

### **Key Findings**

- The current paid parental leave policy does not provide adequate financial support to new parents. The model currently offers an earnings replacement rate of 55%, which imposes financial constraints on many Canadian families.

- The current policy does not provide a leave period long enough for parents to adapt to the birth or adoption of a child. The current paid leave period is one year in length; many parents expressed a desire for a longer leave period in order to experience development milestones and to defer the use of outside childcare providers.
- Many jurisdictions offer more generous, flexible and egalitarian paid parental leave benefits. Quebec, Denmark and Sweden all offer higher earnings replacement rates, flexibility in the use of benefits and designated paternity leave periods. Sweden and Denmark also offer longer paid leave periods.
- The current paid parental leave policy does not sufficiently encourage the equal distribution of childcare and household maintenance between mothers and fathers. The current model does not include a non-transferable paternity leave period, which past research has demonstrated is instrumental in promoting gender equality in the home.

## **Recommendations**

From the results of the data analyses, I develop five policy options. I evaluate these options using five criteria: effectiveness; scale of cost; political feasibility; stakeholder acceptability; and vertical equity. The intended outcome of the policy option assessment is a reduction in the incidence of role overload experienced by working mothers, achieved through an increase in fathers' participation in childcare and an increase in financial support for new parents. From the evaluation, I make the following recommendation:

- Adopt the HELP model of paid parental leave benefits. This model extends the current one-year leave period to 18 months, reserving the additional six months for fathers. The six-month paternity leave period would still allow mothers to take six months of paid leave, and leave six months to be shared between the two parents. Additionally, this model provides an earnings replacement of 80% to a maximum salary of \$60,000. Benefits would be available to all Canadian parents, including the self-employed, and would be administered from funds external to the Employment Insurance program.

In addition to the recommended policy, I note the need for workplaces to adopt more family-friendly policies for both mothers and fathers. It is important that parents have job security in order to take a paid leave of absence without the risk of termination or demotion. Indeed, a shift toward more family-friendly public policies may be a key opportunity for businesses to increase competitiveness by offering employees with young children additional benefits.

# 1. Introduction

Canadian women's labour force participation has increased exponentially in the past four decades. This is particularly true for women with children: in 1976, 36% of Canadian families with children under the age of 16 were dual-earner households (Marshall, 2006). In 2005, 69% of Canadian families were dual-earner households, with both parents participating in the labour force (Marshall, 2006). The shift in gender roles is likely the result of many factors, including changing public perceptions of women's presence in the workplace, along with rising living costs and stagnating wages.

Despite making great strides in career development, Canadian women continue to bear the majority of responsibilities related to childcare and household maintenance. The 2010 General Social Survey indicates that women spend on average 1 hour and 13 minutes more than men on the daily care of children and the completion of household chores (Béchar, 2011). The pressure to perform multiple roles has led to an increasing incidence of role overload among Canadian working mothers. Role overload – defined as having too much to do in the amount of time available – can have chronic physical and emotional health implications, and can affect one's ability to perform the role of caregiver and employee (Lowe, 2005). In fact, past research has shown that individuals suffering from work-life imbalance are more likely to be dissatisfied with their employers and to take sick leave, with resulting costs estimated at \$10 billion per year (Duxbury and Higgins, 2003b).

Paid parental leave policies play an integral role in alleviating the feelings of time pressure associated with role overload (Ray, Gornick and Schmitt, 2008). In addition to providing time and financial support to new parents, a well-constructed paid parental leave policy encourages the equal distribution of household labour between mothers and fathers, and lessen the expectation for mothers to be the sole caregivers for their children (Brighouse and Wright, 2008; Ray, Gornick and Schmitt, 2008). Previous



research has demonstrated that these shifts in social expectations are essential to the reduction of role overload (Coverman, 1989).

## **1.1. Policy Problem**

The paid parental leave benefits currently available to Canadian parents are insufficient to alleviate feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers. The major gaps in this policy are three-fold: First, the Canadian government offers little financial support to new parents, especially given the costs of housing, which have risen 76% since 1976 (calculations based on data collected from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2010; Canadian Real Estate Association; Community Foundations of Canada, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2011a). The paid parental leave program offers parents up to 55% of their previous years' salary, with a maximum weekly benefit amount of \$468 per week (Service Canada, 2011). The temporary earnings reduction for many parents is considerable, leading many mothers to return to work within the first six months of giving birth to or adopting a child (Marshall, 2003). In fact, 1 in 10 Canadian mothers not receiving maternity benefits return to work within 2 months of giving birth, and 25% take an average of only five months of parental leave (Marshall, 2003).

Second, the current paid parental leave policy offers only one year of paid leave to new parents. Many parents have stated that one year of leave is not enough to experience many developmental milestones with their newborns, and to adjust to a new lifestyle as parents (or, for those that are already parents, as parents of multiple children) (Albrecht, 2011). Mothers, in particular, find it difficult to return to their jobs after only one year or less, citing difficulties transitioning back to the workforce due to concerns over their childrens' well being and feelings of separation anxiety (see: section 5.1.2).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the Canadian federal government offers no paternity leave period to fathers. Unlike many other jurisdictions, which offer several days to several months of paid paternity leave benefits, Canada offers only a shared parental leave period. Mothers wishing to take an extended leave, however, typically use this time. As such, there is no policy-driven impetus for fathers to take a paid leave of absence upon the birth or adoption of a child. A wealth of research demonstrates that

this discrepancy in caregiving burden reinforces traditional gender norms, perpetuating the expectation that women act as sole caregivers, while at the same time maintaining paid employment outside of the home (Ray, Gornick & Schmitt, 2008; Brighthouse and Wright, 2008). As such, the current paid parental leave policy is insufficient to help alleviate feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers in Canada.

## **1.2. Rationale for the Focus on Mothers**

There are two main reasons why I have decided to focus this study on mothers. First, research shows that mothers experience more difficulty balancing multiple roles than do fathers. Kerry Daly (2000) notes, “26% of married fathers, 38% of married mothers, and 38% of single mothers experience severe time stress.” More recently, Katherine Marshall (2006) notes that 55% of working mothers in dual-earner households feel pressed for time on a regular basis.

The main reason I focus my study on mothers is to highlight the threat to gender equality posed by poorly designed family policies. As stated earlier, Canadian women have made breakthroughs in the public sphere when it comes to gender equality. Not only are more women participating in the labour force, but they are also more frequently filling positions historically held by men. The Canadian Institute for Health Information, for example, notes, “[b]etween 2004 and 2008, the number of male physicians increased by 3.8%, while the number of female physicians grew by 16.3%” (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2009). Moreover, the organization reports that nearly 40% of Canadian family doctors in 2008 were women, and almost 30% of specialists were also female (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2009).

Nonetheless, gender inequality in the home persists. Women still face social expectations to be caregivers and nurturers despite also being employed. Although official statistics show otherwise, informal surveys of Canadian mothers illustrate that over 90% of mothers are the spouse responsible for arranging childcare, more than 85% are the ones responsible for doing laundry, and nearly 70% are the partner responsible for completing other chores in the home (*Canadian moms and money: results from our family finances survey, n.d.*). It is clear that a major discrepancy exists in the progression

of women's rights between the public sphere of the workplace and the private sphere of the home.

Public policy has a role to play in addressing gender inequality in the home through its ability to normalize behaviours. A wealth of evidence-based research illustrates, "policies [influence] change through changing people's preferences, for example through fostering social norms or influencing attitudes." (Collier, Cotterill, Everett, Muckle, Pike & Vanstone, 2010). Indeed, Canadians have demonstrated high responsiveness to changes in family policy: when Quebec introduced paid paternity leave in 2006 there was an increase of over 20% in the take-up of paid leave among fathers (Marshall, 2006).

### **1.3. Policy Window**

Since 2006, Canada has been under the leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada. Supporting families was a central feature of the party's platform, which included family tax cuts to increase financial support to Canadian households with children (Conservative Party of Canada, 2009). Perhaps this is an opportunity for Canadians to engage in dialogue about what types of paid parental leave policies would best suit today's households.

In 2011, Christy Clark became Premier of the province of British Columbia. Included in her platform was an emphasis on promoting family well being. Clark's Families First agenda boasted her desire to "[modernize] our approach to healthy families" by creating policies "designed to strengthen BC families" (The Families First Agenda for Change). Although parental leave benefits fall under federal jurisdiction, support from provincial leaders is key to advancing strong family policies in Canada.

Finally, the current economic climate presents an excellent opportunity to encourage parents to take extended leaves of absence upon the birth or adoption of a child. The Government of Denmark, for example, implemented extended paid leave benefits for all parents in order to reduce official unemployment rates (Compston and Madsen, 2001). Hugh Compston and Per Kongshoj Madsen (2001) state, "the critical factor motivating the government to introduce parental leave [in the early 1990's]

appears to have been the argument that it could help to reduce unemployment.” Indeed, when parents take a leave of absence from their jobs, it creates a (temporary) position available to a job seeker. As such, the Canadian federal government may consider this an opportunity to attract investment by reducing official unemployment rates across the country.

## **2. Background**

Over the last several decades, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of Canadian women in the workforce. Statistics Canada data show that the gap between men and women in the Canadian labour force was 24 percentage points in 1986. By 2005, the difference was reduced to 10 percentage points. The same trend is observed among married women and women with children: in 1986, 40 – 50% of married women worked, compared to 60% of unmarried women. In 2005, the labour force participation rates of the two groups were the same. Similarly, “the difference between married women with children and those living alone was 21 percentage points in 1986, [and] the difference in 2005 was down to 12 points.” Increased female labour force participation has meant a deviation from the “traditional” household composition, in which the male breadwinner works to support his stay-at-home wife and their children. Compared to 1976, when dual-earner households comprised 36% of all households in Canada, the percentage of households with children in which both parents worked stood at 69% in 2005<sup>1</sup>.

### **2.1. Factors Contributing to the Increase in Female Labour Force Participation**

A number of factors have likely contributed to the increase in female labour force participation. In this study, I focus on two: changing social norms and the simultaneous trend of increasing costs of living and stagnating incomes. Focussing on these two factors, as opposed to including others, allows for a brief but comprehensive discussion of factors contributing to the increase in female labour force participation in Canada.

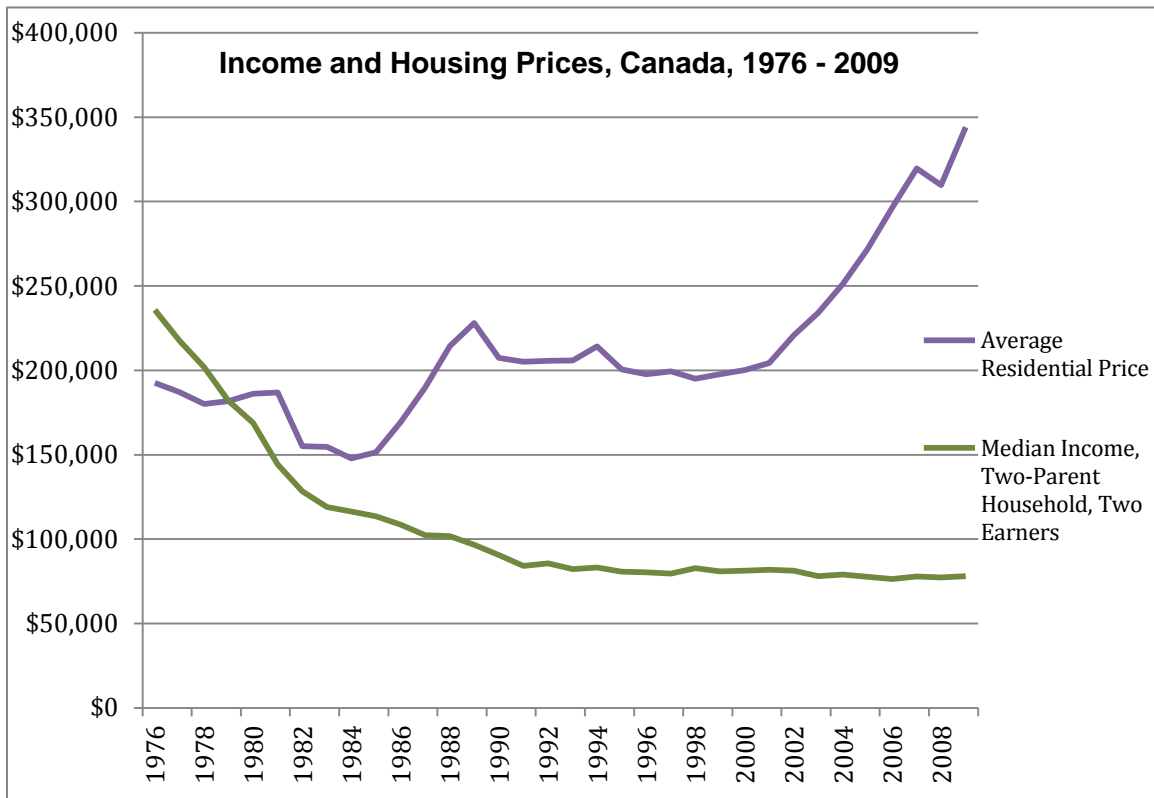
<sup>1</sup> All of the information for this paragraph was collected from Marshall 2006

The feminist movement helped to normalize employment for women, particularly with the popularity of liberal feminism in the 1970's (Eisenstein, 1987). Liberal feminism asserts, "female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world" (Tong, 1989). During the civil rights movement of the 1960's, it became apparent that, in addition to racial discrimination, women were also facing systemic gender discrimination (Tong, 1989). During this time, women fought commonly held beliefs that they should remain in the home as caregivers and nurturers, and were therefore unable to participate in paid labour (Lopata and Norr, 1980). Female labour force participation has since continued to increase, as evidenced by the statistics presented earlier.

In addition to a shift away from traditional gender norms, economic factors have encouraged increases in mothers' employment. The Centre for the Study of Living Standards has documented the stagnation of Canadian wages, confirming, "median real earnings of individuals working full-time on a full-year basis barely increased between 1980 and 2005" (Sharpe, Arsenault & Harrison, 2008). Specifically, the organization notes that permanent, full-time employees in Canada have seen their incomes increase only \$53 from 1980 to 2005 (from \$41,348 to \$41,401, respectively, accounting for inflation) (Sharpe, Arsenault & Harrison, 2008).

The trend of stagnating incomes is especially alarming considering the drastic increase in Canadian housing costs in the same time period: since 1976, the average residential price across all provinces has risen by 79% (calculation based on data from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2010; Canadian Real Estate Association; Community Foundations of Canada, 2010). The reason for including housing costs is because shelter continues to be one of the greatest expenditures in Canadian households (Statistics Canada, 2010a; Statistics Canada 2010b). In 2002, housing costs accounted for 18% of Canadian families' total expenditures; by 2009, this figure had increased to nearly 20% (Statistics Canada, 2010a; Statistics Canada 2010b). With average housing costs continuing to rise across the country, it is likely that this shelter will continue to account for a large proportion of household expenditures in coming years. Figure 1 below illustrates the concurrent trend of stagnating incomes and increasing housing prices in Canada since 1976:

**Figure 1: Income and Housing Prices, Canada, 1976 – 2009**



Sources: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2010; Canadian Real Estate Association; Community Foundations of Canada, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2011a. N.B. Data are adjusted for inflation

Childcare provision has become increasingly expensive as well, further exacerbating the financial strain experienced by Canadian families. In relative terms, families in Newfoundland spend approximately 14% of household income on childcare in a given year (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004). In British Columbia, childcare costs account for 20% of household spending (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2004). High costs of daycare can likely be attributed to insufficient supply. In 2007 there were 837,923 regulated childcare spaces across the country, amounting to only 26,661 more spaces than were available in the previous year (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2008). Indeed, this represents the smallest increase in the number of available childcare spaces in several years (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, 2008).

Family finances are especially daunting when a parent takes a leave of absence due to the birth or adoption of a child. A two-parent, dual-earner household of average income in British Columbia, for example, will experience a 14% reduction in household earnings when the lower income-earner takes a period of paid parental leave (Kershaw 2010). The same couple will experience a nearly 50% reduction in household income if the higher earner takes the same period of parental leave (Kershaw 2010). In the Canadian context, the lower income earner is typically the mother (Kershaw 2010). Yet data show that when parents split the paid parental leave period equally, the reduction in household income is significantly less. As opposed to the 50% reduction in net disposable income noted above, parents that share paid parental leave equally will experience a 25% reduction in household income during the leave period (Kershaw 2010). This has implications for the equal distribution of childcare and household responsibilities, a topic that is addressed in further detail later in this study.

## **2.2. Longer Working Hours and More Unpaid Labour in the Home**

As a result of rising costs of living, Canadian parents are spending more hours per day at their jobs. Based on results of a 2001 cross-national study of over 31,000 Canadian employees and employers, Duxbury, Higgins and Coghill (2003) conclude that time spent on paid and unpaid work has increased significantly in recent years. More specifically, trend data show that hours of paid work for employed Canadians aged 20 – 64 increased by 15% from 1981 to 1998, resulting in less time spent on leisure and with family and friends (Zuzanek, 2009). Today, Canadians aged 25 – 54 - the childbearing cohort – typically spend over 38 hours per week at work (Statistics Canada, 2011b). Compared to men - who spent 39.2 hours per week working in 2010 - women spent 32.7 hours per week at work (Statistics Canada, 2011b). What is important to note here, however, is that while average working hours for men have decreased since 1976, for women the number of hours spent at work per week has *remained constant* over the past 35 years (Statistics Canada, 2011b).

Despite the significant increase in female labour force participation over the past four decades – and the relatively high proportion of time spent on paid work for women



of child-bearing age - women continue to bear the majority of childcare responsibilities in the home. Writing for Statistics Canada, Martin Turcotte (2007) illustrates trends in family time in Canada between 1985 and 2006. Turcotte notes, “women have continued to devote appreciably more time than men to caring for the children by, for example, reading to them, taking them to the park, helping them with homework or driving them to various activities” (Turcotte, 2007). More specifically, he states,

“female workers living with a spouse and a child under 5 [spend] an average 47 minutes more with the members of their family than [do] men with similar family structure (holding the other factors constant). The same analysis showed that women living with a spouse and at least one child between age 5 and 12 (but no preschoolers) [spend] an average 23 minutes more with family than [do] men with an identical family structure.”

More recent data illustrate that mothers still assume the majority of childcare and other household responsibilities. According to 2010 General Social Survey results, women spend, on average, 1 hour and 13 minutes more than men caring for children and performing other household duties (Statistics Canada, 2011b). More specifically, while women spend, on average, 4 hours and 38 minutes each day on childcare and household labour, men spend 3 hours and 25 minutes on the same tasks (Statistics Canada, 2011b). This discrepancy is particularly evident when children are very young: “For example, women with children up to the age of 4 spent 6 hours 33 minutes per day caring for them. Among men, the corresponding duration was 3 hours 7 minutes” (Statistics Canada, 2011b).

This trend is not isolated to unemployed mothers or mothers with part-time employment, however. The 2010 General Social Survey results show that mothers of young children that had full time employment spent 2 hours and 14 minutes more on childcare per day than did men who worked full time (Statistics Canada, 2011b). The increase in female labour force participation evidently has not led to a reduction in time spent on unpaid household work and childcare. The consequences of long working hours in addition to the childcare obligations of working mothers are explored next.

### **2.3. Increasing Incidence of Role Overload and Consequences**

Longer work days and the relatively high proportion of time spent on unpaid work by mothers of young children has coincided with higher incidence of role overload. Role overload falls within a broad category termed 'work-family conflict', and is the result of managing multiple roles in a given amount of time (Lowe, 2005). More specifically, role overload can occur "when persons (usually women) simultaneously fulfill multiple roles, such as spouse, parent and paid worker" (Coverman, 1989).

From their 2001 cross-national study of over 25,000 Canadians, Duxbury and Higgins (2003a) concluded, "[a] significant proportion of the Canadian workforce is having difficulties balancing the competing roles of employee, parent, spouse, and eldercare giver." Of the general population in Canada, however, it is working mothers that are experiencing the most time-stress and difficulty balancing work and family commitments. According to a report produced for the Vanier Institute of the Family, 26% of married fathers, 38% of married mothers and 38% of single mothers experience severe time stress on a regular basis (Daly, 2000). What is especially interesting is that, while women report a substantial increase in feelings of time-stress after becoming parents, men report no change in their ability to balance work and family commitments upon becoming parents (Daly, 2000). Moreover, in 2003, 52% of mothers surveyed felt satisfied with their ability to manage their multiple roles, compared to 71% of fathers (Marshall, 2006). This is likely attributable to the expectation that mothers should maintain both their caregiving roles and their employment, and the lack of expectation that fathers also participate in caregiving.

Feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers can have wide-ranging implications for their health and well being, and can affect their relationships and performance in the workplace. These consequences have long-term costs for wider society. For this study, I choose to focus on two consequences of role overload: poor physical health and workplace absences. I discuss only these factors because there is sufficient evidence relating them to role overload. Moreover, both factors represent great economic costs to Canadian taxpayers. In terms of health, Jacques Barrette (2009) reports three key findings: (1) persistent work-family conflict and feelings of role overload have been associated with an increase in mood disorders such as depression, anxiety

and irritability, as well as drug and alcohol dependence; (2) physical symptoms, “including hypertension, high serum cholesterol levels, cardiovascular and gastrointestinal disorders, allergies, and migraines” result from role overload; and (3) among couples with children, these symptoms are observed more often in women than in men. Barrette (2009) estimates that the costs to the Canadian healthcare system of work-family conflict, including feelings of role overload, “represent billions of dollars.”

Role overload has similarly negative effects on mothers’ performance in the workplace. There is a large literature demonstrating that employees experiencing work-family conflict feel work demands interfere with family life, are less satisfied with life, and are less productive in the workplace (American Psychological Association). Moreover, employees struggling to balance work and family commitments “miss an average of 13.2 days of work a year versus 5.9 days missed for those without.” (Barrette, 2009). The difference between women and men is striking: in 2010, Canadian men missed, on average, 7.6 days of work compared to 11.0 days missed by women (Uppal, 2011). The financial losses resulting from absenteeism in Canada are estimated at \$2.7 billion a year in direct costs and \$10 billion in indirect costs (Barrette, 2009).

## **2.4. The Role of Paid Parental Leave Policies in the Alleviation of Role Overload**

Family-friendly policies such as paid parental leave benefits have proven to be effective in alleviating feelings of role overload experienced, most significantly, by working mothers. The OECD defines family-friendly policies as,

“...those employment-oriented social policies that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life by fostering adequacy of family resources and child development, favor the parental choice about work and care, and promote gender equality in employment opportunities” (in Bernal and Fruttero, 2007)

Paid parental leave benefits are categorized as family-friendly policies due to their ability to provide a job-protected leave of absence for parents caring for their infant children, while at the same time providing added financial support (Vanier Institute of the

Family, 2011). The goal of these policies is to support healthy child development and provide balance for parents managing multiple roles (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2011). Next I discuss how the provision of time and financial support and the encouragement of shared caregiving responsibilities made for well-developed paid parental leave policies.

### **2.4.1. Time**

The provision of time is an important contribution to parental and child well being. Academic research demonstrates that longer parental leave periods are more conducive to mothers' recovery from childbirth and provide more opportunity for mothers to bond with infants (Lero, 2003). Because of the logistics of post-partum recovery and breastfeeding, it is important that women take an extended period of leave following the birth of a child (Galtry and Callister, 2005). More importantly, however, a sufficiently long paid leave period affords both mothers *and* fathers the opportunity to take a period of leave after the birth or adoption of a child. Indeed, evidence shows that, in countries with short leave periods, fathers are unlikely to take a period of paternity leave (Kamerman and Gatenio, 2002). Mothers are then established as the primary caregivers. This then leads to role overload when mothers must manage their roles as both caregivers and employees once they transition back into the workforce after the leave period.

### **2.4.2. Financial Support**

Adequate financial support is essential to a well developed paid parental leave policy. In addition to increasing household income and children's human capital, sufficient financial benefits provide an incentive for both mothers and fathers to take a paid leave of absence upon the birth or adoption of a child (Bernal and Fruttero, 2007). Because men typically earn more than women, it is financially more burdensome for Canadian fathers to take a period of parental leave than it is for mothers (Kershaw, 2010). The following data were cited earlier but are worth repeating here: in British Columbia, a two-parent, dual-earner household of average income will experience a reduction in household income of approximately 14% when the lower income-earner (in the Canadian context this would normally be the mother) takes a period of paid maternity and parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child (Kershaw, 2010). The same

couple will experience a nearly 50% reduction in household income if the higher earner takes the same period of parental leave (Kershaw, 2010). Given this reality, it is only logical that the average family would have the mother take the majority of the leave period. As noted earlier, however, this decision establishes the mother in the caregiving role, thus leading to difficulties managing both parenting and employment obligations upon returning to the workforce.

### **2.4.3. Shared Caregiving Responsibilities**

According to Brighthouse and Wright (2008), a well developed paid parental leave policy “attempt[s] to create incentives that put some pressures on families to move toward a more egalitarian gender distribution of caregiving activities within the family.” Such policies offer generous time and financial support to new parents, as well as a non-transferable paternity leave period, in order to reflect the needs of dual-earner families. A period of leave designated for fathers “creates active incentives for men to take more leave than they would if the same amount of time were available to the family as a unit without their participation” (Brighthouse and Wright, 2008). Indeed, survey research (Haas and Hwang, 2008) has shown that the amount of paternity leave taken increases paternal participation in childrearing and a father’s level of satisfaction with his caregiving.

Recent policy developments in the province of Quebec reflect this statement: in 2006, the province of Quebec began administering a provincially funded parental benefits program entitled the “Quebec Parental Insurance Plan” (Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009). The program includes a 5-week non-transferable period of paternity leave. During the first year after the policy was implemented, take-up of paid leave by fathers in Quebec rose by over 20% (Marshall, 2008). The behavioural changes of fathers influenced by the implementation of QPIP benefits has huge implications for mothers’ experiences of role overload; if fathers take a period of leave after the birth or adoption of a child their roles as both employee and caregiver are also established, relieving some of the expectations faced by their spouses (Ray, Gornick & Schmitt, 2008).

## **2.5. Canada's Paid Parental Leave Policy: Overview and limitations**

This section provides a description of Canada's paid parental leave policy and identifies some of its limitations.

### **2.5.1. *History of Paid Parental Leave in Canada***

In Canada, the paid parental leave program operates from the federal Employment Insurance (EI) program, and is financed by employee payroll contributions. Paid maternity benefits have been offered to Canadians since 1971, when working mothers were offered 15 weeks of paid leave<sup>2</sup>. In 1990, the benefits program was enhanced to include 10 more weeks of paid leave, which could be shared by the parents or used solely by one. In 2000, the policy was modified once again to offer 35 weeks of parental leave, with an aim to provide job security and important caregiving time for working parents. Most recently, in 2010, the Canadian federal government extended paid leave benefits to self-employed parents, who were previously excluded from the program (Canada Employment Insurance Commission, 2011).

### **2.5.2. *Eligibility Requirements***<sup>3</sup>

Currently, those eligible for paid parental leave benefits through Canada's EI program include birth mothers and surrogate mothers (maternity benefits) and biological and adoptive parents (parental benefits). In order to qualify for benefits, the applicant's earnings must have been reduced by more than 40% after the birth or adoption of a child. Moreover, the applicant must have accumulated at least 600 insurable hours of work in the previous 52 weeks, or since the last time he or she applied for benefits. Eligible applicants begin receiving benefits after a 2-week waiting period beginning from the date the child is born or placed with the adoptive parents.

<sup>2</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all information collected from this paragraph comes from Marshall, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> All information on eligibility requirements derived from Service Canada, 2011.

### **2.5.3. Length of Leave**

A mother receiving paid maternity leave benefits may receive a maximum of 15 weeks paid leave benefits; parental leave benefits, which can be used by either parent or shared between the two, are available to a maximum of 35 weeks (Service Canada, 2011). Currently there is no separate allocation of paternity leave benefits available in Canada (outside Quebec). With regard to the amount of leave actually taken, in 2009 mothers used 14.6 weeks of the 15 weeks of available maternity leave (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2011). This is to be expected due to the physical effects of childbirth. Of the 35 weeks of paid parental leave, in 2009, parents took 32 weeks of leave, on average (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2011). This is likely due to the financial constraints posed by the loss of income experienced during the leave period. In Canada, mothers take the majority of the one-year leave period (Marshall, 2003).

Critics of Canada's paid parental leave period charge that the policy should be extended to provide parents with 18 months of paid leave, an increase of 6 months (Kershaw, 2011). Arguments for extended paid leave provisions are based on a variety of factors, including health. Indeed, some public health researchers argue that breastfeeding a child for at least one year after 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding will greatly reduce incidence of health complications, and that a mother returning to work during this period often coincides with reduced or ceased breastfeeding (Galtry and Callister, 2005). Paul Kershaw, a family policy researcher at the University of British Columbia's Human Early Learning Partnership, is another proponent of the 18-month leave provision. Kershaw argues that adding 6 months of job-protected paid leave – which ideally would be reserved for fathers – would provide working parents with time that is essential to healthy child development, meanwhile encouraging both mothers and fathers to participate in caregiving activities (Kershaw, 2011). A sufficiently long leave period, including a non-transferable paternity leave period, will encourage the shared division of household labour, thus reducing feelings of role overload among working mothers.

#### **2.5.4. Earnings Replacement**

In terms of the amount of benefit, eligible applicants may receive 55% of their income, to a maximum salary of \$44, 200<sup>4</sup>. This amounts to a maximum benefit of \$468 per week. The current maximum benefit would provide a benefit recipient with an income of \$23,400 if a full year of paid leave is taken (accounting for the 2-week unpaid waiting period). While receiving benefits, parents may earn the greater of \$50 or 25% of benefit payments per week. From 2009 to 2011, the average weekly amount of parental benefit was \$360. This amounts to a monthly benefit income of \$1440 and, for parents using the entirety of the one-year leave period, an annual income of \$18,000. A table of average benefit payments to Canadian parents is included in Appendix A.

The consequences of a low earnings replacement rate are a shorter leave period and low take-up of leave benefits by fathers. Many academics and members of the public have criticized the current income replacement rate provided by the paid parental leave program. As noted by Katherine Marshall (2003), low-income parents and parents that cannot survive financially on the 55% rate are more likely to return to work within a few short months of giving birth or adopting a child. Fathers, who usually earn a higher income than their female counterparts, are unlikely to take a leave of absence when it will result in financial strain to the household (Marshall, 2008). This, in turn, leads to role overload for mothers through the establishment of the traditional gender roles dictating the mother as caregiver and father as breadwinner.

#### **2.5.5. Paternity Leave Provision<sup>5</sup>**

Unlike many jurisdictions, including the province of Quebec, Canada does not offer paternity leave benefits to fathers. Eligible fathers are entitled to some or all of the 35 weeks of parental leave benefits, however Statistics Canada data has demonstrated low participation rates for Canadian fathers. Outside of Quebec, 10% of fathers make

<sup>4</sup> All information regarding the earnings replacement rate comes from Service Canada, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> All information in the first paragraph regarding the paternity leave provision comes from Marshall, 2008.



use of paid parental leave benefits. Moreover, Canadian fathers use only 10.8 weeks, on average, of paid parental leave benefits, accounting for approximately one-third of the shared parental leave period and just one-fifth of the total leave period, when maternity benefits are included.

Canada's paid parental leave policy has received much criticism in recent years for failing to implement a non-transferable paternity leave period. Many academics have objected to this policy gap, noting wide-ranging implications including mothers' early return to work due to financial strain and lack of paternal involvement in child-rearing (Marshall, 2003). The most oft-cited consequence of this inaction is the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, which can lead to feelings of role overload. Writing for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay (2007) summarizes the problems inherent in a poorly designed paid parental leave policy:

“Ultimately, the role of parental leave is to allow both parents to balance their work and family lives. But international data indicate that, without time specifically reserved for the father, it is quite rare to see men take much of the leave. In countries that want men to participate in the same way as women, “daddy’s months” have been introduced in order to increase their participation; otherwise parental leave translates into a kind of extended maternity leave, thus reproducing the traditional division of roles and the economic inequalities between men and women.”

Indeed, prior research on role overload has shown “that husbands’ domestic participation alleviates some of the role overload their wives might otherwise experience, thus leading to a decrease in wives’ stress levels (Coverman, 1989). As such, extending paid parental leave more explicitly to Canadian fathers can ultimately reduce the pressures faced by working mothers to manage multiple roles.

### **2.5.6. Other Limitations: Eligibility Requirements, Administrative Factors and the Employer's Perspective**

Another major limitation of the Canadian paid parental leave benefit plan is the restriction of eligibility to those that have worked at least 600 hours in the previous year<sup>6</sup>. In addition to excluding from the program men and women that are underemployed and unemployed, this limitation presents an obstacle for anticipating the birth or adoption of a second or third child that haven't had time to accumulate the requisite insurable hours. Because a mother or father with one child may have reduced his or her hours of work while raising that child, the birth or adoption of a second or third child may mean that he or she will not qualify for benefits due to not meeting the minimum required hours of work.

Additionally, a 2-week waiting period exists at the beginning of the benefit period, during which parents receive no benefits. This period may impose additional financial strain on families already facing strained by having to support an additional member of the household. Although the Canadian federal government recently removed the waiting period for a second claimant in the same household – for example, for a father choosing to use parental leave after his wife has claimed maternity benefits – removal of the initial waiting period may considerably reduce financial stress, and thereby role overload, for working mothers (*7 ways to improve maternity leave in Canada*, n.d.).

Research shows that employer support for leave-taking can have positive implications for working mothers' experiences of role overload (Warren and Johnson, 1995). Yet a major obstacle for some parents wishing to take leave is their employer. Employers, particularly from smaller organizations or firms, are often concerned about the costs of temporarily replacing employees; the potential loss of productivity; and the potential for employees to take advantage of their generosity (Appelbaum and Milkman, 2011). As such, it is not unusual for parents – but most commonly mothers – to face

<sup>6</sup> All information collected for this paragraph comes from Service Canada, 2011.

pressure from their employers to return to work shortly after the birth or adoption of a child, or risk losing their position or possible demotion.

Yet research shows that there is a discrepancy in employers' perceptions of extended leave and the reality of their experiences<sup>7</sup>. A 2011 study investigating employers' experiences before and after the implementation of California's paid family leave policy – a policy which is strikingly similar to Canada's – illustrates this argument well. The authors state that most employers – including small businesses – reported little impact on their business's productivity after the policy's implementation. Additionally, surveyed employers reported the implementation of paid family leave had either a positive effect or no effect at all on employee performance and morale. Nonetheless, Canadian employers do appear to be concerned about potential negative consequences of extended leave policies, a concern that is reflected in their interactions with their employees. I explore this topic further when I analyze blog postings written on parenting resource websites.

The benefits provided by the current paid parental leave policy are clearly insufficient to alleviate feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers in Canada. The current model perpetuates traditional gender roles in the home, which conflicts with the progression of gender equality in the public sphere of the workplace. As such, mothers are expected to be both income-earner and caregiver, while fathers maintain the sole responsibility of breadwinner. Given the wide-ranging consequences of role overload – exacerbated by these gender imbalances in the home - it is imperative “that policy changes reflect the current situation of families rather than the one-earner (usually male) model of many years ago” (Sauvé, 2009). In the next section I discuss the methodology used to explore this important public policy issue.

<sup>7</sup> All information collected for this paragraph comes from Appelbaum and Milkman, 2011.

## **3. Project Methodology**

### **3.1. Overview of Project Methodology**

The methodology used in this project has three major components: (1) a comparative case study analysis; (2) thematic analysis of online blog entries; and (3) interviews. The case studies examine paid parental leave benefits offered in three jurisdictions to support new parents with time and finances. The goal of the case study analysis is to identify approaches taken by jurisdictions other than the Canadian federal government to support parents balancing multiple roles. Comparing similar factors across cases provides a clear framework for improving upon the current paid parental leave policy in Canada. The next section provides the rationale for the case selection. Following the discussion of the case study analysis, I elaborate on the analysis of blog entries and the use of interviews in this study.

### **3.2. Rationale for Case Selection and Value of Case Study Analysis**

There are three primary considerations for including Quebec, Denmark and Sweden in the case study analysis. First, each jurisdiction has a well established paid parental leave policy. That is, paid parental leave benefits have been in place in each of the selected jurisdictions for at least 5 years. As such, there is significant data and research illustrating both the benefits and the limitations of each policy. Moreover, each jurisdiction is either a developed country or, in the case of Quebec, part of a developed country. Finally, in each jurisdiction, women commonly participate in paid labour. Including this final criterion was to ensure that households in each of the selected cases generally reflect the circumstances of Canadian households, in which both parents typically participate in the paid labour force.

According to Robert K. Yin, “[a] case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (in Woodside and Wilson, 2003). One strength of comparative case study analysis, in particular, is that it “can illuminate the significance of the idiosyncratic as opposed to the common, or shared experience” (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2001). This is especially significant in this study of paid parental leave benefits, as I seek to illustrate, through a comparative case study analysis, that Canada’s paid parental leave policy is somewhat exceptional in its poor provision of parental leave benefits. The comparative case study analysis addresses the following research question: How can the paid parental leave policy be improved to alleviate feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers in Canada? The blog entry analysis addresses the remaining research question: Why do Canadian working mothers experience role overload? I elaborate on the methodology used in the blog entry analysis following the discussion of each of the cases selected for the case study analysis.

### **3.3. Overview of Selected Cases**

#### **3.3.1. Quebec<sup>8</sup>**

Quebec began administering its provincial paid parental benefit plan in 2006 as part of the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) (Marshall, 2008). The provincial policy was implemented in order to allow workers to “better reconcile work and family responsibilities...[and]...encourage them in their desire to have children and support them as they devote more time to their children in their first months.” These goals would be achieved by improving upon the paid parental leave benefits offered by the federal EI program.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all information collected for subsection 3.3.1 was collected from Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009.

The new benefit scheme offered parents a higher rate of income replacement and paid benefits designated for fathers' use, while eliminating the waiting period and providing the option to reduce the length of the leave period at a higher earnings replacement rate (Marshall, 2008). More specifically, parents in Quebec are currently able to receive a maximum of 70 - 75% of the previous year's income, a significant increase from the 55% income replacement rate offered by the federal government. Quebec mothers are eligible to receive 18 weeks of paid leave earning 70% of the previous year's income, in addition to 32 weeks of parental leave that may be shared by both parents or used exclusively by one. With reference to the paternity leave allocation, Quebec fathers are eligible for up to 5 weeks of paid leave at the 75% earnings replacement rate.

Quebec is included in the analysis because it fits the selection criteria noted earlier.

### **3.3.2. *Denmark***

Denmark began offering paid parental leave benefits to its residents in 1967 (Gupta, Smith & Verner, 2006). The goal of this policy was "to allow families to combine a working life with a well-functioning family life" (Todd, 2004). Moreover, "[t]he flexible structure of the leave gives fathers the opportunity to take a more active role in caregiving and allows parents to stay connected to the labour market by working part-time" (Todd, 2004).

Currently, mothers in Denmark are eligible to receive 18 weeks of paid leave: 4 weeks are allocated for the month before giving birth to or adopting a child, with 14 weeks remaining for the post-birth or adoption period<sup>9</sup>. Two weeks of paid leave are available to the father, and an additional 32 weeks of leave are available for either parent to use. Furthermore, a parent may prolong the 32-week parental leave to up to 64

<sup>9</sup> The remaining information collected for the discussion of Denmark comes from Rostgaard, 2011.

weeks at a reduced income replacement rate. Both mothers and fathers receive full earnings replacement for maternity, paternity leave, and parental leave, up to a maximum of 515 Euro on a weekly basis.

Like Quebec, Denmark is included in the analysis because it fits the case selection criteria.

### **3.3.3. Sweden**

In the 1970's, Sweden transformed its maternity leave program to a parental leave program in order to encourage greater participation of fathers in childcare and household work<sup>10</sup>. All Swedish parents are eligible to receive 68 weeks of paid parental leave, with 8 weeks reserved for each parent. The earnings replacement is 80% for employed parents. Moreover, low-income or unemployed parents are entitled to receive earnings replacement, but at a lesser rate. In 2008, Sweden introduced a gender equality bonus, which is a financial incentive for parents to share the parental leave equally.

As a country with well-established and relatively generous family policies, Sweden provides an excellent case for illustrating the benefits of paid parental leave for working mothers trying to establish a healthy balance between work and family commitments.

The next section describes the blog data selection process.

## **3.4. Inclusion and Analysis of Internet Blog Postings**

The blog entries provided the primary data on mothers' experiences of role overload and work-family conflict. The rationale for using parent-centred blogs as a data

<sup>10</sup> All information collected for subsection 3.3.3 comes from Ministry of Health and Social Affairs Sweden, 2009.

source is that they provide a convenient forum for parents to access information, support and resources and to discuss some of the unique experiences associated with being a parent (Coulson, Buchanan & Aubeeluck, 2007). Thematic analysis of blog entries provides an opportunity to illustrate experiences, feelings and thoughts on role overload, work-family conflict and paid parental leave benefits at the time they are experienced, as opposed to feelings being recalled in an interview process. Moreover, feelings expressed online may be more naturalistic than those expressed in an interview setting, as perceived anonymity - especially in the company of peers - may provide a sense of comfort and safety to participants, allowing them to express themselves more freely (Ridings and Gefen, 2004).

There are three primary considerations for including the blogs or websites from which the online data were collected. First, the selected sources were chosen for emphasizing their desire to allow parents to voice the full spectrum of their parenting experiences. This includes negative feelings such as guilt, shame and frustration that are not always expressed in mainstream parenting resources. Second, the parent resource websites selected for this study are based in Canada, or have forums strictly for the use of Canadian parents. This was important for ensuring feelings reflected in the blog entries pertained to the Canadian context. Finally, the selected websites must have had blog entries written within the last five years. This was to ensure that opinions expressed about Canadian paid parental leave benefits pertained to the current policy.

Table 1 provides a list and description of blogs and websites from which the data were collected:



**Table 1: Selection of blogs**

Name of Website or Blog	babycentre.ca	circleofmoms.com	jezebel.com	Liberating Working Moms, One Voice at a Time
Description	A Canadian website that aims to provide high-quality medical information and community support for parents.	A website committed to providing online support and high-quality information about parenting.	A website providing commentary on celebrity, sex and fashion.	A website providing support for mothers struggling to balance work and family commitments

Because the primary focus of this study is to understand working mothers' experiences of role overload in relation to paid parental leave benefits, the methodology used for data collection doesn't include views expressed by policymakers and other government officials. The opinions of policymakers and other government stakeholders are included, however, in the analysis of policy options.

### **3.5. Framework for Collection of Blog Entry Data**

Prior to collecting blog entry data, I created a framework by which to organize the blog postings. The framework resembled an outline for a semi-structured interview, consisting of six broad topics and numerous subtopics to be addressed by the blog entry data. The first topic pertained to mothers' weekly routines, touching on issues such as their type of employment, the amount of time spent with their children and the type of childcare provider they use. Next, I sought to determine how mothers balance work and family commitments, with specific reference to feelings of time stress and feelings of guilt when at work. The third topic related to the effects of role overload on women's daily lives, including their relationships and their work responsibilities. Next, I sought blog entries discussing the use of paid parental leave benefits, including both positive and negative experiences with the benefits. The fifth topic pertained to how Canada's paid parental leave policy might be modified to better suit working mothers. The final topic was created to collect general opinions of paid parental leave and work-family

imbalance. Collecting blog entries according to this framework facilitated the thematic analysis by organizing similar blog entries into relevant categories. The complete framework used for the collection of blog entry data is included in the appendix.

### **3.6. Analysis of Blog Entries**

The blog entries were collected in several steps. First, I searched each forum using the following keywords: parental leave; stress; maternity leave; working mothers; Canada; work; and money. By using these search terms, I was able to locate blog entries in which mothers discussed their experiences balancing their parenting role with their role as an employee, as well as their experiences with or feelings about the paid parental leave benefits available to them. The search terms were particularly useful for websites such as babycentre.ca, which has numerous forums on topics that are not relevant to this study (Thelwall, 2006). Next, I saved the relevant postings to a Word document. Third, I eliminated responses that were more than 5 years old in order to maintain only comments pertaining to the current paid parental leave policy (Thelwall, 2006). After eliminating older posts, I had collected 219 postings in total, which were then organized according to the framework previously discussed. Forty-three different commentators, all of which appear to be women, wrote the postings.

After collecting and organizing the blog entry data, I conducted a thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” Themes “[capture] something important about the data in relation to the research question” and the advantages of this type of analysis include allowing for “social...interpretations of data” and its usefulness for policy development (Braun and Clarke, 2006). With regard to this study, a thematic analysis of blog entries allows for an understanding of the experiences of working mothers in relation to the provision of paid parental leave benefits, and the implications of these feelings for Canada’s paid parental leave policy. It is important to note here that not all of the themes became apparent after the data were organized into the framework discussed above. Indeed, some themes included in this study arose unexpectedly.

### **3.7. Interviews**

The third methodology used in this study is semi-structured interviews. In order to obtain feedback on the five policy options, I interviewed two individuals: one participant is a working mother living in the Metro Vancouver area. The other is Paul Kershaw, an academic at the University of British Columbia who developed the HELP model of paid parental leave discussed in detail in the discussion of policy options. I also contacted twenty-one Conservative Members of Parliament; none responded to my request for an interview. This is, perhaps, indicative of the current federal government's stance on the issue of paid parental leave in Canada.

Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes, and took place in an office-based setting. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of each individual's perspective on Canada's paid parental leave policy, as well as the proposed policy options (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The use of a semi-structured interview schedule allowed me to address some specific questions I had for the participants, but allowed for the emergence of other relevant discussions during the interview process (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The next section illustrates the findings from the case study analysis and analysis of blog entries.

## **4. Case Study Analysis of Quebec, Denmark and Sweden**

This section summarizes the findings of the comparative case study analysis. The factors addressed in the case studies are:

- Length of paid parental leave;
- Length of paid maternity leave;
- Length of paid paternity leave;
- Take-up of maternity benefits;
- Take-up of paternity benefits;
- Income replacement rate;
- Waiting period for start-up of benefits;
- Program eligibility;
- Incidence of role overload.

A more detailed discussion of the findings for each case is included following the table below. This section concludes with a summary of best practices drawn from the case studies. Table 2 below illustrates the criteria used to evaluate the cases selected for the analysis and the results of the case study analysis:

**Table 2: Summary of Case Study Analysis Findings**

	Canada	Quebec	Denmark	Sweden
Length of paid parental leave <sup>11</sup>	35 weeks	32 weeks	32 weeks	68 weeks
Length of paid maternity leave	15 weeks	18 weeks	18 weeks	8 weeks
Length of paid paternity leave	None	5 weeks	2 weeks	10 days (plus 8 weeks from parental leave)
Take-up of maternity benefits	62%	77%	99%	90%
Take-up of paternity benefits	10%	56%	62% <sup>12</sup>	77% <sup>13</sup>
Earnings replacement	55%	70 – 75%	100%	80%
Waiting period	2 weeks	None	None	None
Eligibility requirements	At least 600 hours of work in previous year	At least \$2000 earned in past year	At least 120 hours of work in 13 weeks preceding the paid leave	Based on residence or employment in Sweden
Incidence of role overload <sup>14</sup>	High	High	High	High

<sup>11</sup> Parental leave can be shared between 2 parents or used solely by one parent

<sup>12</sup> The distinction is not made whether this figure is from parental or paternity leave

<sup>13</sup> Take-up of paternity leave with first child

<sup>14</sup> Rankings of high and moderate based on research findings discussed in section 4.1.9

## 4.1. Findings

Next I present an overview of the findings of the comparative case study analysis.

### 4.1.1. *Length of Paid Parental Leave*

As discussed earlier in this study (see: section 1.2), the length of the paid parental leave period is critical to the incidence of role overload. Compared to Canada's policy, the selected cases – except Sweden – offer approximately the same amount of paid parental leave.

In 2006, the government of Quebec began administering paid parental leave benefits to its residents through a provincially-funded program separate from the federal EI program (Service Canada, 2011)<sup>15</sup>. Typically, parents in Quebec may take 32 weeks of leave in addition to maternity and paternity leave. Of those 32 weeks, 7 weeks are replaced with 70% of the previous years' income and 25 weeks are covered by a 55% earnings replacement rate. Parents may, however, take 25 weeks only with an earnings replacement of 75%. Like the benefits provided by the federal EI program, the parental leave period in Quebec begins when a child is born and ends after 52 weeks.

Adoptive parents are entitled to 37 weeks of paid leave during the first year after placement. Under the Basic Plan, 12 weeks are covered by a 70% income replacement rate, and the remaining 25 weeks are covered by 55% earnings replacement. For adoptive parents wishing to take less time, 28 weeks of paid leave are available with an earnings replacement of 75%.

Denmark has a long history of providing paid parental leave benefits to its residents, beginning in 1913, when women who had paid into the program were given

<sup>15</sup> From this point forward, all information collected on the length of paid parental leave in Quebec comes from Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009.

financial assistance following the birth of a child<sup>16</sup>. Maternity leave was gradually expanded to a period of several weeks, until 1984, when parental leave benefits were extended also to fathers. At this time, fathers taking leave would only receive compensation if their spouses were currently earning an income.

In 2002, Danish Parliament expanded the existing parental leave system further, “aim[ing] for an open and flexible leave system, where mothers and fathers can freely decide how to divide the leave.” Since then, Danish mothers may take 18 weeks of leave, and fathers are entitled to 2 weeks of leave before the child reaches the age of 14 weeks. Additionally, both mothers and fathers are entitled to 32 weeks of leave, receiving earnings replacement for only 32 weeks total. Parents may extend the 32-week leave period to 40 weeks, if both are working part time and are using the leave periods at the same time. A period of 5 weeks of paid leave may be reserved for later use until the child becomes 9 years of age.

Parental leave in Sweden has evolved considerably since its initiation in 1913, when women that had paid into public health insurance were entitled to financial assistance after the birth of a child. It wasn't until 1974, however, that fathers also became entitled to such benefits and that a shared leave period became available. In 1995, Swedish mothers and fathers were each given one month of paid leave, which was extended to 2 months each 8 years later.

Since 2002, Swedish parents have been given paid leave benefits for a period of 480 days, which may be split between the two for all but the 60 days allotted to each. In a move to further encourage the equal sharing of childcare responsibilities, the Swedish government implemented the Gender Equality Bonus in July 2008 (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs Sweden, 2009). This policy provides a financial incentive to parents that share the parental leave period equally, as opposed to one parent using the majority or all of the leave period (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs Sweden, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all information collected regarding the length of paid parental leave in Denmark and Sweden comes from Valdimarsdóttir, 2006

While the length of the shared leave period is similar across all cases – save for Sweden – other features of each jurisdiction’s paid parental leave program may be considered to be superior to Canada’s in their potential to reduce feelings of role overload among working mothers. These factors – specifically, the provision and length of paternity leave, the income replacement rate and program flexibility – are discussed below.

#### **4.1.2. Length of Paid Maternity Leave**

The maternity benefit period is a fundamental feature of any paid parental leave program. This time is critical for maternal health as well as infant bonding, widely recognized as having long-term health and developmental implications for a child (Ruhm, 2002).

Quebec mothers may choose to take 18 weeks of paid leave at 70% of their previous salary, or 15 weeks at an earnings replacement rate of 75%<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, mothers that experience a pregnancy interruption are entitled to the same benefits at the time of the interruption, in order to account for the emotional and physical repercussions of these events. Maternity benefits are available beginning the 16th week before the expected week of delivery and, for mothers that experience a pregnancy interruption, beginning the week of the interruption.

Again, Denmark began offering paid leave to pregnant women in 1913. Gradual changes to this program were made over several years until 1960, when mothers were granted 14 weeks of paid maternity leave<sup>18</sup>. In 1989, Danish mothers were granted eight weeks of paid leave prior to the birth of the child, and 24 weeks following the date of birth. Of these 24 weeks, the final 10 could be shared between the two parents as they wished. Currently, Danish mothers may take 18 weeks of paid leave: 4 weeks are to be

<sup>17</sup> All information on the length of maternity leave in Quebec was collected from Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all information regarding the length of maternity leave in Denmark and Sweden was collected from Valdimarsdóttir, 2006



taken prior to the birth of the child, with the remaining 14 weeks reserved for the post-natal period.

As discussed above, maternity benefits in Sweden became available for a period of 4 weeks in 1913 to women who had paid into public health insurance<sup>19</sup>. In 1937, this leave period was extended to 3 months, and again to 6 months in 1954. As of 2002, 8 weeks of paid maternity leave, in addition to the mother's portion of parental leave (or all but the 60 days reserved for fathers), are available to Swedish mothers. Moreover, Swedish women may receive a pregnancy benefit if they must leave their position of employment due to a strenuous job or a working environment that may be dangerous to an unborn child (Forsakringskassan, 2010). Women receiving the pregnancy benefit may receive 80% of the country's sickness benefit (Forsakringskassan, 2010).

Similar to the analysis of the shared parental leave period discussed above, there is little variation in the length of paid maternity benefits available to mothers in Quebec, Denmark and Sweden. This is likely due to the fact that the majority of mothers in each of the selected jurisdictions will use some or all of the shared parental leave period.

#### **4.1.3. Length of Paid Paternity Leave**

Paid paternity leave is increasingly being recognized for its ability to normalize a more equal distribution of childcare responsibilities, with implications for role overload among working mothers (Ray, Gornick & Schmitt, 2008).

Paternity benefits for Quebec fathers have been available since the program's inception in 2006<sup>20</sup>. Under the Basic Plan, Quebec fathers may take 5 weeks of paid leave with 70% earnings replacement. The Special Plan offers 3 weeks of paid leave,

<sup>19</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all information collected for this paragraph comes from Valdimarsdóttir, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> All information regarding the length of paid paternity leave in Quebec comes from Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009.

covering 75% weekly income replacement. Benefits are available beginning the week the child is born and until 52 weeks after the child's birth.

Beginning in 1991, Danish fathers received financial compensation during the paternity leave period<sup>21</sup>. Prior to 1991, fathers were entitled to parental leave, but were only compensated if their spouse was a current wage earner. In 1997, the paternity leave period was extended by 2 weeks; however, these additional weeks were taken away in 2002. Currently, the paid paternity leave period available to Danish fathers remains at 2 weeks in length.

Sweden was the first of the Nordic countries to grant fathers a designated paid paternity leave period, established in 1974. Currently, fathers in Sweden are allotted 60 days of paid leave plus a 10-day bonus period when the child is born (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs Sweden, 2009). Additionally, fathers are entitled to the shared parental leave period as much as mothers, and since 2008, have been encouraged by the Swedish government to use an equal amount of parental leave with the introduction of the Gender Equality Bonus (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs Sweden, 2009).

Canada remains one of the few OECD countries that do not provide a non-transferable paternity leave period to fathers. The consequences of this inaction are a lack of incentive for fathers to participate in caregiving activities in the early years of a child's life, and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. As previously discussed, the ongoing expectation for mothers to bear the majority of childcare responsibilities is implicated in the increasing incidence of role overload among working mothers.

#### **4.1.4. *Take-up of Maternity Benefits***

Take-up of maternity benefits in all of the selected cases is high, which can most likely be attributed to the need for recovery after childbirth, in addition to the logistics of breastfeeding and the desire to bond with an infant child. Take-up of these benefits is

<sup>21</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all information regarding the length of paid paternity leave in Denmark and Sweden comes from Valdimarsdóttir, 2006.

the lowest in Canada, however, perhaps a result of the low earnings replacement provision and strict eligibility requirements. I elaborate further on these topics later in the case study analysis.

In 2006, the first year of the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 77% of Quebec mothers used maternity leave benefits, compared to 62% of Canadian mothers outside of Quebec<sup>22</sup>. This discrepancy has been attributed to the relatively relaxed eligibility requirements in Quebec, as well as the coverage of self-employed workers. Mothers in Quebec also use the majority of the paid maternity leave period, which is also the case for the 62% Canadian mothers outside of Quebec that do use maternity benefits.

Take-up of maternity leave benefits in Denmark is higher than in Canada, Quebec and Sweden. A 2006 survey of mothers that gave birth to or adopted children in 2005 showed that 99% of Danish mothers took a period of paid maternity leave benefits<sup>23</sup>. Of this 99%, the majority used the entire 14-week maternity leave period. Like Quebec, the high take-up of maternity leave benefits in Denmark is likely due to the absence of strict eligibility requirements, and perhaps also attributable to the high earnings replacement rate. These factors make parental benefits more accessible to more people, particularly those experiencing financial hardship.

Like Denmark, a very high proportion of Swedish mothers use paid maternity leave benefits. On average, 90% of Swedish mothers use paid maternity benefits (Kamerman and Gatenio, 2002). In addition to taking the majority of the maternity leave period, Swedish mothers also use the majority of the shared parental leave period (Pylkkanen and Smith, 2004). This is not unlike most jurisdictions that offer both shared parental leave and maternity and paternity benefits – for social and financial reasons, mothers are more likely to take the majority of the paid leave period when there is no or little incentive for fathers to participate (Marshall, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> All information regarding the take-up of maternity leave in Quebec was collected from Marshall, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> All information regarding the take-up of maternity leave in Denmark was collected from Rostgaard, 2011.

The maternity leave period is a central feature of any paid parental leave policy. While take-up of these benefits is very high in Quebec, Denmark and Sweden, nearly 40% of Canadian mothers do not take a period of paid maternity leave, likely the result of the financial and administrative limitations posed by the EI program.

#### **4.1.5. Take-up of Paternity Benefits**

The province of Quebec has seen a drastic rise in the number of fathers taking paid leave following the birth of a child since the implementation of the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan in 2006. In 2004 and 2005, for example 22% and 32% of Quebec fathers, respectively, took a paid leave of absence following the birth of a child<sup>24</sup>. Interestingly, in the year following the implementation of the QPIP, the take-up rate for paternity leave benefits in Quebec was 56%, compared to 32% in the previous year. Throughout the rest of Canada, the take-up rate of parental leave benefits among fathers remained at 10% in the same years. What is especially interesting is that Quebec fathers are more likely to take a paid leave of absence if their partner has also used parental benefits, whereas fathers in the rest of Canada were significantly less likely to do so.

According to survey results, fathers in Quebec typically use the entire paternity leave period, in addition to a small portion of the shared parental leave period. Consequently, in 2006 Quebec fathers used, on average, 7 weeks of paid leave. This is a significant reduction from the previous year, when Quebec fathers took 13 weeks of paid leave under the federal EI policy. Katherine Marshall (2008), notes, “[p]erhaps because paternity and parental benefits are listed as separate programs, men in Quebec are more inclined to participate in only one.”

In Denmark, like Quebec, take-up of paternity leave benefits is relatively high. According to a Statistics Canada report, in 2006 62% of Danish fathers made use of

<sup>24</sup> All information regarding the take-up of paternity leave in Quebec was collected from Marshall, 2008.

paternity leave benefits (Marshall, 2008). Moreover, a 2006 study of parental leave in Denmark found that 89% of fathers took a paid leave of absence after the birth of a child, and that 95% of them did not have problems leaving their place of work for the leave period (Roostegard, 2011). Haataja (2009) notes that the take-up of paternity benefits in Denmark has increased since the 1990's, but has remained at around 60% since the 2000's. Nonetheless, it is evident that significantly more fathers make use of paternity leave in Denmark than in Canada.

Like Quebec and Denmark, the take-up of paternity leave among Swedish fathers is high relative to Canada. From 1993 – 1998, 77% of Swedish fathers took a period of paid leave upon the birth or adoption of their first child (Pylkkanen and Smith, 2004). The take-up rate among fathers dropped to 69% after the birth or adoption of the second child, and rose to 72% with a third child (Pylkkanen and Smith, 2004). Due to variations in the collection and measurement of data, it is difficult to obtain data on the average length of leave taken by Swedish fathers. Nonetheless, it is evident that Swedish fathers, compared to those in Canada (excluding Quebec), are much more likely to participate in the paid parental leave period. This is likely a factor of the higher earnings replacement rate, in addition to cultural factors (Marshall, 2008).

Take-up of paternity leave benefits is a key factor to the alleviation of role overload of working mothers. When fathers participate in caregiving, mothers are able to fulfill their roles of employee and caregiver, while relying on the support of fathers for childcare and household maintenance. The features included in a parental leave model, such as the earnings replacement, may influence take-up rates of fathers. This is discussed next.

#### **4.1.6. *Earnings Replacement Rate***

The earnings replacement rate is an important aspect of paid parental leave policies, as it may influence the length of leave taken by mothers and, more importantly, fathers. Compared to Canada, each of the selected cases provides an earnings replacement rate that is significantly greater. The details of each jurisdiction's earnings replacement rate are discussed below.

The earnings replacement provided by Quebec's Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP) has remained the same since the program started in 2006<sup>25</sup>. A unique feature of the Quebec policy is the variation in the income replacement depending on the number of weeks taken in the leave period; parents wishing to take less than the typically allotted paid leave period may do so at a higher earnings replacement. For both maternity and paternity leave, parents taking the full number of weeks – 18 and 5, respectively – will receive benefits at a 70% income replacement. They may also reduce the number of weeks taken – 15 and 3, respectively – earning 75% of their previous income in weekly instalments. Parental leave is available for 32 weeks – 7 at 70% and 25 at 55% - or 25 weeks at 75% earnings replacement. The benefit amount for adoptive parents is similar: 37 weeks may be taken – 12 weeks at 70% and 25 weeks at 55% - or 28 weeks at 75%. The maximum insurable earnings considered in the determination of an individual's QPIP benefit amount is \$66,000, a stark contrast to the \$44,000 maximum imposed by Canada's paid parental leave policy.

The earnings replacement provided to Danish parents has changed considerably since the program's inception in the early 1900's. As noted earlier, in 1913, only women who paid into the benefit scheme received financial assistance after the birth of a child<sup>26</sup>. In 1919, public sector workers were given half-time pay during the maternity leave period, and in 1960 women were given 14 weeks maternity leave compensated by sick-time allowance. Many modifications to the Danish parental leave policy were made over the following decades. Currently, parents taking paid leave receive full earnings replacement to a maximum weekly benefit of CDN \$700 (515 Euros converted). This amounts to nearly twice the weekly benefit provided by the Canadian policy and is in line with the earnings replacement offered by Quebec's Parental Insurance Plan.

<sup>25</sup> All information regarding the earnings replacement rate in Quebec was collected from Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> All information regarding the earnings replacement rate in Denmark was collected from Valdimarsdóttir, 2006.

In Sweden, there are three levels of compensation available under the parental leave policy<sup>27</sup>. However, for the majority of Swedish parents, the income replacement rate equates to 80% of the pre-leave salary, a considerable difference from the Canadian federal government compensation. The first benefit level is the sickness benefit, determined by the individual's income. The sickness benefit is paid out in circumstances such as multiple births or for parents with joint custody. For parents with no or low incomes, however, the benefit level is SEK 180 per day, paid for 390 days. Finally, there is a minimum benefit level, also used in the event of multiple births or joint custody arrangements. Additionally, "people can work shorter days and be compensated for the difference in pay, up until the time that the child turns eight."

All of the selected cases offer a considerably higher financial benefit to new parents. Financial support is key to alleviating role overload: the higher household income provided by a higher earnings replacement means that both mothers and fathers may take a longer period of leave. More importantly, a higher earnings replacement is more likely to encourage fathers to take a period of paid leave and to take on the role of caregiver.

#### **4.1.7. *Waiting period***

None of the selected jurisdictions require a waiting period at any point of the paid parental leave period. In fact, Canada's paid parental leave policy is somewhat unusual in this regard, as it requires benefit recipients to endure a 2-week unpaid waiting period at the beginning of the paid leave period - described as an insurance deductible – but is likely the result of paid parental leave benefits being administered through the Employment Insurance program (Service Canada, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> All information collected for the discussion of Sweden's earnings replacement rate comes from Försäkringskassan, 2011 and Valdimarsdóttir 2006.

#### **4.1.8. Eligibility**

The Canadian federal government requires parents to have worked at least 600 hours in the year preceding their application for paid parental leave benefits, a stipulation that has been widely criticized by parents and policymakers, as noted earlier in this report (Service Canada, 2011). The discussion that follows illustrates how each of the selected cases determines eligibility for paid parental leave benefits.

In Quebec, paid parental leave benefits are available to all biological and adoptive parents that have had or adopted a child on or after January 1, 2006; resided in Quebec when the benefit period begins; have ceased working; and that have earned at least \$2000 in the year preceding the benefit period<sup>28</sup>. The most marked difference from the federal EI program is the minimum working hours requirement. As stated above, parents must only have earned \$2000 in the previous year to be eligible for QPIP benefits. This allows considerable flexibility, particularly for parents expecting a second, third or fourth child, who have likely reduced hours of work in order to care for their existing children.

In Denmark, “[a]nyone in a recognised partnership, including same-sex partnerships”, may apply for paid parental leave, given he or she has worked at least 120 hours in the 13 weeks prior to taking a leave of absence<sup>29</sup>. More restrictions are placed on temporary workers, who may not receive benefits if they are eligible for unemployment insurance, and for self-employed workers, who must provide proof of employment activity in at least 6 of the 12 months preceding the paid leave period. Students and those completing vocational training are eligible for benefits, as are unemployed individuals, who receive unemployment benefits in lieu of parental benefits. Those receiving sickness benefits – an amount equivalent to the maternity leave benefit – continue receiving this assistance for the duration of the parental leave period.

<sup>28</sup> All information regarding eligibility requirements for QPIP benefits was collected from Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> All information included in this paragraph was collected from Rostgaard, 2011



In Sweden, there are no requirements – other than being a parent – for receiving paid parental benefits<sup>30</sup>. Indeed, benefits are available “to the child’s parents or to the person with legal custody of the child...[as well] to the person or persons who receive a child with a view to adoption.” Additionally, benefits are available to “the person living with the parent who has or has had children with the parent; or has been married to the parent; or has been the parent’s registered partner.”

The eligibility requirements imposed by a parental leave policy are key to the accessibility of benefits, and thus to alleviating role overload. Parents that are ineligible to receive benefits are more likely to return to work earlier after giving birth to or adopting a child (Marshall, 2008). In practice, then, it is typically the mother that will take a reduced period of leave, thus establishing herself in the caregiver role and increasing her likelihood of experiencing role overload.

#### **4.1.9. Incidence of role overload**

In Canada, working mothers increasingly experience role overload<sup>31</sup>. As discussed earlier in this study, mothers spend more time on caregiving responsibilities than do fathers, despite maintaining paid employment. As such, they are more likely to experience severe time stress on a regular basis.

In Quebec, like the rest of Canada, role overload among working mothers appears to be high<sup>32</sup>. Quebec employees spend less time than other Canadian employees on leisure activities and household chores. Quebec employees, however, report more flexibility in their working schedules and also have access to programs such as universal childcare. Importantly, Quebec, more than the other Canadian provinces, has less dual-earner households and more single working mothers. As such, it is difficult

<sup>30</sup> All information regarding Sweden’s eligibility requirements collected from Försäkringskassan, 2011

<sup>31</sup> All information collected for this paragraph comes from Daly, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> All information collected for this paragraph comes from Duxbury and Higgins, 2003a.

to make an accurate comparison of incidence of role overload between Quebec and the remaining Canadian provinces and territories.

Despite Denmark being well known for its family-friendly policies, Danish women, like women in the other selected cases, experience high levels of time stress<sup>33</sup>. Working mothers in Denmark “more often feel trapped in the daily routine and often feel under stress when not enough time” compared to fathers. Like Canadian mothers, Danish mothers complete more household work than do Danish fathers.

Role overload and the subsequent effects on women’s physical and mental health have become increasingly prevalent in Sweden<sup>34</sup>. In 2002, for example, the number of Swedish workers on sick leave had doubled from five years previously. The majority of those on sick leave, however, were women. In response to these findings, the Swedish government implemented several measures to improve work-life balance among working women, including flexible work schedules and incentives for employers that take action to reduce work-life imbalance among their female employees.

## **4.2. Summary of Findings**

The preceding sections illustrated the paid parental leave benefits available to new parents in Quebec, Denmark and Sweden. While the history and provisions of each jurisdiction’s paid parental leave policy vary, three key qualities are shared by each jurisdiction’s policy:

1. Each jurisdiction, relative to Canada, offers benefit provisions that better reflect the needs of families with two working parents. Each of the selected cases, for example, offers a period of paternity leave. In addition to promoting a more equal distribution of childcare responsibilities, providing fathers the option of taking paternity leave means that mothers that wish to return to the workforce after taking maternity leave may do so;

<sup>33</sup> All information collected for this paragraph comes from Deding and Lausten, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> All information collected for this paragraph comes from Todd, 2004.

fathers may then take on the role of caregiver, providing parental support that is essential to healthy child development, meanwhile offsetting childcare costs. Additionally, Quebec, Denmark and Sweden all offer flexible leave options. These policies allow parents, for example, to opt for a higher earnings replacement rate in exchange for a reduced leave period or the ability to reserve a portion of the paid leave period to be used at a later date. Paid parental leave policies that reflect the current make-up of Canadian families – families that include two working parents – aid in preventing feelings of role overload often experienced by working mothers.

2. Additionally, each of the selected cases has implemented a parental leave policy that better reflects the financial needs of new parents, who often experience financial strain following the birth or adoption of a child. As illustrated in the previous sections, Quebec, Denmark and Sweden all offer considerably higher earnings replacement rates to parents taking a period of paid leave. Additionally, there are few eligibility requirements for parents in Quebec, Denmark and Sweden that wish to take a period of paid parental leave, and, unlike in Canada, there is no waiting period. Paid parental leave policies that allow more parents to take parental leave, and provide families with more financial support, can greatly reduce the incidence of role overload. Indeed, when family finances are strained, the higher income earner will typically refrain from taking parental leave, leaving the other parent to remain as the primary caregiver. In Canada, the higher income earner is typically the father, meaning that the mother is relegated to the caregiver position.

3. Finally, Quebec, Denmark and Sweden offer considerably more incentive for fathers to use parental leave benefits. Each of these jurisdictions provides a non-transferable period of paid paternity leave to new fathers. More importantly, the take-up rate of paternity leave benefits in each of the selected cases is high. A key factor influencing the take-up rate of paternity leave benefits – due to gender discrepancies in income - is the earnings replacement rate provided by a parental leave policy. As noted above, each of the cases compared in this analysis provide relatively high earnings replacement rates to new parents, providing even greater incentive to fathers wishing to use paternity leave benefits.

Nonetheless, incidence of role overload, work-life conflict and time stress among working mothers appear to be prevalent in all of the selected cases. The paid parental leave policies in these jurisdictions, then, may not be the most effective at promoting shared caregiving and thus reducing role overload. Indeed, important considerations may include the length of paternity leave taken – versus the take-up rate alone – and the quality of paternal involvement in childrearing during the paternity leave period.

In the following section I use themes derived from the blog entry analysis in order to demonstrate the extent to which Canadian working mothers experience role overload.

## 5. Findings from Blog Entry Analysis

The case study analysis summarized the paid parental leave benefits provided to new parents in Quebec, Denmark and Sweden. The findings indicate how the Canadian paid parental leave policy might be modified to reduce the incidence of role overload among working mothers. Findings from the thematic analysis complement the case study analysis by showing more specifically how and why Canadian mothers experience role overload. I derive five broad categories of themes from the blog entries: themes pertaining to time, finances, work, relationships and societal pressures are all included in this analysis. Table 3 highlights these categories, along with the themes included in each.

**Table 3: Themes Derived from Blog Entry Analysis**

Category	Theme
Time	- Time strain
Finances	- Financial strain
Spousal relationship	- Lack of spousal assistance with child care activities - Traditional gender roles and the reiteration of female as caretaker
Employment	- Difficulties experienced during transition back to work - Job insecurity experienced during leave period
Society	- Stigma of unemployment benefits

In the following sections I discuss the themes from the blog entry analysis.

### 5.1. Themes Arising from Blog Entries

The following themes sections explore the above-noted themes in further detail, drawing upon specific quotations derived from the selected parenting blogs.

### **5.1.1. Time Strain**

Time strain is prevalent among working mothers. Specifically, parents (though mostly mothers) note feeling extremely pressed for time after transitioning back into the workforce; they struggle to “do it all.” One contributor states, “I...feel guilty that I don’t get to spend as much time with [my son] during the week- just a couple of hours on weekday mornings.” Yet another writes, “I wear many hats, and sometimes I wonder if there are too many atop my head.” Mothers frequently state that they don’t have enough time to spend with their children; that they lack quality time with their spouses; and that there is a shortage of time for themselves. Referring to her husband, a blog contributor states, “[w]e hardly ever see each other and when we do, we're both exhausted and don't spend "quality" time together.” Another mother notes, “I have a lot of sleeping issues...I’m exhausted and I don’t really get much “me” time.”

Blog contributors often recount how they cope with feelings of time strain, and note strategies and policies that help to alleviate this pressure. One mother – who was able to take the full leave period of one year - recounts her positive experience with the Canadian paid parental leave benefits program:

In the end, it’s time that makes the transition to working mom easier on us up here in the North; at least it did for me. I had an entire year with my daughter before I faced the prospect of returning to my job...I didn’t have all the guilt and sadness that comes from knowing someone else would likely witness all those firsts, and I got to just live in the moment for a year, waiting to see what new and wonderful developments my daughter would have.

Furthermore, some mothers state that their spouses were unwilling to assist with household activities, further exacerbating their feelings of time stress and general frustration. I elaborate on this issue in the themes exploring spousal relationships.

Feelings of time strain were prevalent among mothers participating in parenting blogs. Time strain is a key indicator of role overload, and can have negative effects for a woman’s health and well being, as well as her relationships with her children, spouse and employer.

### **5.1.2. Financial Strain**

Experiences of financial strain arise repeatedly in the blog entries. Contributors discuss the difficulties experienced with a loss of nearly half of their salaries while on paid leave, as well as the costs of childcare and fears of financial hardship in the months and years to come. Others note their dismay at having to return to work early solely for financial reasons. Blog contributors frequently relay feelings of fear and stress, as well as experiences of insomnia and emotional breakdowns over financial stress. One mother states, "I am only 17 weeks pregnant but it has been so stressful that I break down crying on a regular basis." Another contributor notes, with reference to her decision to return to work shortly after childbirth, "...if I was not working and we were just getting [my husband's] EI check we would not have enough \$\$ to live off of."

Another topic that frequently arises is the dilemma over returning to work when the paid leave period ends. Many participants seemed reluctant to return to work when the financial gains of doing so were so insignificant after accounting for childcare and travel costs. The following quote is an excerpt of one women's experience. Her feelings, however, exemplify the experiences of many working women in Canada:

So once I pay daycare out a month, I will end up taking home \$900.00 a month. So working full time, that is \$5.25 a hour...Could you justify going back to work for \$5.25 an hour working full time? I just can't wrap my head around it.

These findings are supported by prior research illustrating that Canadian families with young children increasingly experience severe financial strain (Campaign 2000; Collin and Jensen, 2009).

Blog participants also discuss strategies for managing finances and how government subsidies mitigate financial strain. Some families, for example, receive childcare assistance from friends and family members. One mother states, "I am lucky that my mom will be "daycaring" for me...we will still pay her obviously but it will be significantly less than we would have to pay for daycare." With regard to government assistance, one mother states, "the bc bonus and canada child tax will certainly help." Several mothers also noted feeling "grateful" for the provisions of the paid parental leave

program, acknowledging that governments in many other countries, such as the US, do not provide any paid parental leave to their residents.

Financial strain experienced during the leave period can be a risk factor for role overload, particularly when this stress leads to an early return to work. As discussed previously, feelings of role overload can have serious implications for a mother's well being and have high economic costs for society.

### **5.1.3. *Lack of Spousal Assistance with Childcare***

An overwhelming number of blog contributors express frustration with the lack of expectations for fathers to participate in childcare and other activities related to household maintenance. Mothers say that, despite being employed, they take on the majority of household chores and childcare, including coordination of after-school activities and transportation to and from daycare and school. They state that – even when their partners take leave – they do not maintain the household to the same degree, and that there are double standards in terms of expectations for women and men in terms of childcare. One mother's experiences illustrate these sentiments:

I am trying to get my husband to do some more for me, but he can not, or won't or will just complain about it...If it was me at home with both boys all day, he would be telling me to suck it up. But I am so tired of trying to keep the house clean, do laundry plus work and take care of the boys.

Another participant expresses feelings of anxiety about the state of her home when her husband will eventually take paid leave. She states, “[m]y hubby doesn't cook or clean, so I'm more than a little worried about the state of things at home.” This entry is particularly interesting because it demonstrates that even fathers willing to take parental leave – presumably, then, a man with relatively egalitarian views of childrearing – is not accustomed to completing daily household chores. The gendered division of labour illustrated by this quote is indeed implicated in the role overload experienced by working mothers.

Mothers' frustration with their spouses is often compounded by time strain induced by an increase in fathers' working hours. This can be especially true when



financial strain is evident. The loss of half of one parent's income often necessitates an increase in hours of work for the other parent, which in Canada is usually the father. One mother states, "[m]y husband works 6-7 days a week for 10-14 hours a day." The increase in her husband's working hours left her responsible for the majority of childcare and household responsibilities. Her case, however, is not atypical. Informal research conducted by parenting blog babycentre.ca confirms the gendered division of household labour prevalent in Canadian households. The website's survey of Canadian mothers indicates that 96.1% of participating mothers were the household member responsible for arranging childcare, 85.6% were the ones responsible for doing laundry, 75.8% were responsible for cooking and 67.1% were responsible for managing remaining household chores.

It is evident that mothers often feel frustrated with their spouses' lack of participation in childcare and household care activities. A paid parental leave policy that encourages a more equal distribution of household labour may greatly reduce the incidence of role overload among working mothers in Canada.

#### **5.1.4. *Traditional Gender Roles and Reiteration of the Female as Caretaker***

The perpetuation of traditional gender roles by public and workplace policies is a recurrent theme in blog entries written on parenting websites. Participating mothers express frustration that policy has not yet acknowledged the reality of the two-earner household. They lament the fact that mothers are still expected to take on the majority of the childcare burden, despite making great strides in labour force participation over the past several decades. They also express concern over prioritizing a career over starting a family, as government and workplace policies have yet to incorporate the needs of working women in the development of parental leave policies.

With reference to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, one woman states the following:

"The generation--my generation--that is coming of age and into childbearing years right now is the "we can--and must--have it all" generation, and I don't think that the

structure of the typical household (i.e. the woman has the primary caregiver) has caught up yet”

Another mother expresses fears regarding balancing a career and children:

“For me, there is no choice between having a child or having a career. I'm going to have both, and the more that I think of it, the more terrifying it is, especially since it's something that I am feasibly going to have to start dealing with in a few years”

Reflecting on the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in the workplace, one blog contributor shares the following:

“[My husband] was the first dad at his place of work to request parental leave. A lot of people we talk to are surprised to learn that parental leave can be split. It takes a special kind of man to feel comfortable with staying at home as it is against society's norms”

It is clear from blog entries on parenting websites that mothers are concerned about the role that public policy plays in the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and role overload. Indeed, the single-earner household is no longer prevalent in Canada, which warrants a revision of the current paid parental leave policy.

### **5.1.5. *Difficulties Experienced during the Transition Back to Work***

With regard to the labour force, many blog contributors express having difficulties transitioning back to work after taking a period of paid leave. In fact, this transition period appears to be the point where mothers experience the most role overload, as they try to balance work-related responsibilities and household labour. Some mothers discuss feelings of extreme anxiety prior to their return to the workforce caused by thoughts of hectic schedules and time strain. One mother states, “I stressed my entire last month of leave, just wondering how we would survive...I freaked about the routine, about how we would possibly manage to get up and out the door on time.”

Other participants admit to feeling incompetent upon returning to their previous positions. Specifically, mothers appear to have difficulty performing job-related tasks due

to concerns about the well being of their children in the care of their childcare providers. Some women note feelings of inadequacy in all aspects of their lives, as time constraints permit only limited amounts of energy to be allocated to each activity. Indeed, one mother expresses, “[w]hen I transitioned back to work after having [my daughter] I felt like my job suffered.”

Mothers evidently experience high levels of stress when they return to their previous positions of employment after taking a paid leave of absence. Typical stresses include transportation to and from childcare providers, arriving at the workplace on time and the amount of household maintenance to be completed upon returning home from work. Perhaps if fathers were expected to contribute more to routine childcare activities – for example, transport to and from daycare, school and appointments, as well as the completion of general household labour – the stresses that mothers frequently experience as they transition back to work may be lessened, thus reducing role overload.

### **5.1.6. *Job Insecurity***

While not directly related to role overload, feelings of job insecurity are prevalent among blog contributors and are illustrative of some of the pressures mothers experience while contemplating a period of parental leave. In fact, one blog contributor notes that her feelings of job insecurity are what prohibited her from extending her leave longer than the 52 weeks paid for under the federal EI program. She states, “...even should I live off my savings for [an additional] 6 months, I'd come back to find my job has disappeared.” Other women discuss returning to work within just a few months of giving birth to or adopting a child due to concerns over job security and pressure from their employers to return to work. Another contributor details her experience:

“The first thing my boss said is ‘you're not getting a year, just so you know’...I had my job shifted when i returned from a maternity leave... i had been working in a grocery store bakery, decorating cakes...when i got back it turned into a graveyard shift cleaning ovens. I quit the first night.”

The preceding discussion demonstrates feelings of job insecurity that many women face when they choose to take a period of paid parental leave. This added stress

might contribute to role overload by increasing pressure to return to the workplace. Meanwhile, mothers must grapple with feelings of guilt and concerns about childcare. Providing a period of paternity leave may alleviate both job insecurity and childcare concerns: if fathers more typically take paternity leave, employers may be forced to come to terms with the fact that many of their employees will, at some point, take an extended period of leave. Additionally, fathers would be available to care for children when mothers return to work.

### **5.1.7. *Stigma of Unemployment Benefits***

Blog contributors commonly express feelings of dissatisfaction with the administration of parental benefits through the federal Employment Insurance program. Parents feel that this system is unfair – especially given the two-week waiting period for benefits – and that it does not accurately reflect their stage of life and the purpose for which they are drawing on publicly funded subsidies. These concerns are especially interesting in light of paid parental leave policies in jurisdictions outside of Canada (excluding Quebec). Indeed, most OECD countries administer unemployment benefits and parental leave benefits separately, recognizing that the funds go to different purposes. Evidently, this differentiation is important to parents, who sometimes feel there is a stigma attached to the use of EI benefits for parental leave.

Several of the selected blog entries demonstrate these feelings. Referring to the two-week waiting period imposed on parents receiving benefits through EI, one woman states, “[t]he fact that this rule would apply to a mother beginning her maternity leave, and therefore a very expensive chapter in her family's life, seems punitive and unfair.” Another participant, responding to a moderator’s request for suggestions for improving Canada’s current paid parental leave policy, states, “[u]sing the Employment Insurance system is terrible and doesn't fit what we are doing...We are having children, we're not unemployed.”

While the provision of parental benefits through EI does not, in itself, lead to role overload, administrative procedures used in benefit provision appear to have adverse effects on parents’ – and in particular mothers’ – feelings about the efficacy and

suitability of the program. Indeed, policymakers should perhaps consider the implications of the eligibility requirements and waiting period for new parents.

## **5.2. Summary of Findings**

More than ever, Canadian mothers experience considerable pressure to be both employee and caregiver. The themes derived from the analysis of blog entries collected from parenting websites demonstrate that financial strain and time strain are two key sources of role overload for working mothers in Canada. Household finances were particularly constrained during the paid leave period, leading many mothers to return to work within just a few months of having a new child. An early return to work, for many Canadian women, is the result of pressure from their employers to take a reduced leave period or risk losing their position. The transition back to the workforce, however, increases feelings of role overload as women struggle to “do it all,” particularly when fathers do not contribute equally to childcare and household maintenance. Additional pressures faced by Canadian mothers include societal expectations of women to be the sole caregiver of their children, regardless of employment status, as well as the punitive nature of the paid parental leave benefits provided by the federal EI program. In the following section, these findings, combined with the findings from the comparative case study analysis, are summarized in the context of modifying the current paid parental leave policy.

## 6. Key Findings

Through case study analysis and analysis of blog entries, several gaps in Canada's paid parental leave policy became evident. These have been grouped into four key findings that can be addressed through policy changes.

### **1. The current paid parental leave policy does not provide adequate financial support to new parents.**

Parents, and in particular mothers, experienced severe stress with regard to their concerns over family finances prior to, during and after the leave period. Mothers worried that losing nearly half of their incomes during the leave period would seriously compromise family finances, and that they would subsequently require major lifestyle changes in order to survive. Others expressed concerns about needing to reduce their leave period and subsequently sacrifice important bonding time with their children. Frustration was also evident among higher-earning women, who felt that the \$40,000 maximum benefit consideration is punitive to women that have been successful in their careers. Relative to other jurisdictions, the Canadian policy offers little financial support to new parents.

### **2. The current paid parental leave policy does not provide a leave period long enough for parents to adapt to the birth or adoption of a child.**

Blog contributors frequently expressed frustration with the little time afforded to new parents to take a paid leave of absence. They felt that they missed important milestones in their babies' developments and that they should have the option to care for their own children for some time prior to relying on outside childcare providers. The length of the leave period is especially problematic considering many parents are unable to use the entire one-year leave period due to the financial constraints imposed by the loss of income. Moreover, a longer leave period would allow parents to postpone the use of outside childcare, offsetting a major expense. Compared to governments in other

OECD countries, Canada offers a relatively short leave period. Examples are included in the discussion of the third key finding.

### **3. Many jurisdictions offer more generous, flexible and egalitarian paid parental leave benefits.**

As of 2010, the Canadian federal government offers parents taking paid leave 52 weeks of leave at an earnings replacement rate of 55%. The maximum weekly benefit amount is \$468. Fifteen weeks are designated as maternity leave, while the remaining 35 weeks may be shared between both parents. Finally, benefits are offered on a use-it-or-lose-it basis.

Relative to many other jurisdictions, the provisions of the Canadian policy are meager. Quebec, for example, provides fathers with a 5-week designated paternity leave period that cannot be transferred to the mother. Similarly, Sweden provides fathers with two months of non-transferable paternity leave plus 10 days immediately following the birth or adoption of a child. The selected cases all offer considerably more in terms of financial support to new parents: Quebec offers a 70-75% earnings replacement, to a maximum of \$66,000 and Denmark provides 100% earnings replacement to a maximum of \$700 CDN weekly. With regard to the length of the benefit period, Sweden, for instance, offers parents 68 weeks of paid parental leave. Recognizing that each family's situation is unique, other jurisdictions also offer flexibility in the use of paid parental leave benefits. The Swedish policy allows parents to work part-time while receiving benefits, and Denmark allows parents to reserve some benefits for later use.

### **4. The current paid parental leave policy does not sufficiently encourage the equal distribution of childcare and household maintenance between mothers and fathers.**

Academic research shows that gender equality in the home is important for mothers' well being, and that role overload can be effectively reduced by promoting paternal involvement in household activities (Coverman, 1989). As such, strong parental leave policies should include a non-transferable paternity leave period, in addition to maternity and shared parental leave, so as to allow fathers the opportunity to become

involved in routine aspects of childcare, including regular feedings, unpredictable sleep schedules and general household maintenance.

As discussed above, governments in many other jurisdictions offer substantially more to new parents when it comes to paid parental leave benefits. The provision of adequate financial support, time and paternity leave is particularly important for the wellbeing of mothers, who often experience role overload upon re-entering the workforce after the birth or adoption of a child. In the following section I discuss the criteria and measures used to evaluate policy options for alleviating Canadian working mothers' feelings of role overload.



## **7. Criteria for Evaluation**

Through case study analysis and thematic analysis of blog entries, I have demonstrated the serious limitations of Canada's paid parental leave policy. The current policy offers too little financial support and an insufficient leave period. More importantly, the current policy provides no paternity leave period, a feature that is key to reducing gender inequality in the home and reducing role overload among working mothers. Now, I present a set of six criteria, along with their definitions, that I use to evaluate the policy options presented in the following section.

### **7.1. Definitions, Measures and Methodology**

Table 4 below presents each criterion and its definition, and then describes the methodology used to apply the criteria to each policy option. Following the table is a detailed discussion of each criterion.

**Table 4: Criteria, Measures and Methodology**

Criterion	Definition	Measure	Methodology
Effectiveness	The extent to which a policy option reduces working mothers' feelings of role overload	Scale measuring increase or decrease in take-up rates of paternity leave (low, medium, high)	- Stakeholder interviews - Case study analysis
Scale of Cost	Increase in direct program costs relative to the current policy	Scale measuring increase or decrease in direct program costs (low, medium, high)	- Secondary data
Political Feasibility	Acceptability of policy option to policymakers	Scale measuring level of acceptance by policymakers (low, medium, high)	- Key informant interviews
Stakeholder Acceptability	Acceptability of policy option to those most affected	Scale measuring level of acceptance by key stakeholders (low, medium, high)	- Stakeholder interviews - Blog entry analysis (primary data)
Employer Acceptability	Acceptability of policy option to employers	Scale measuring level of acceptance by employers (low, medium, high)	- Review of academic literature
Vertical Equity	Accessibility of policy to individuals from different income brackets	Scale measuring level of accessibility (low, medium, high)	- Stakeholder interviews

### **7.1.1. Effectiveness**

The effectiveness criterion measures the ability of a policy option to reduce working mothers' feelings of role overload by encouraging fathers to participate more in childcare and unpaid household labour. It is measured on a three-point scale. 'Low' effectiveness implies that the policy is not effective at increasing fathers' participation in childcare and unpaid household labour. 'Moderate' effectiveness implies that the policy may have a

modest or short-term effect on fathers' behaviours. 'High' implies that the policy is able to provoke a considerable and long-term change on the part of fathers to participate more in childcare and unpaid household labour. This criterion is evaluated by assessing the increase in fathers' take-up of paternity or parental leave benefits, gauged from case study analysis and interviews with key stakeholders.

### **7.1.2. *Scale of Cost***

The scale of cost criterion measures the increase in direct program costs relative to the current paid parental leave program in Canada. 'Low' implies little or no change in economic costs to the government. 'Moderate' implies a modest increase in program costs. 'High' implies significant increases to program costs. It is measured by considering the incremental costs to the government incurred by the increase in program participants and increase in financial benefit amount, where appropriate.

### **7.1.3. *Political Feasibility***

The political feasibility criterion measures the acceptability of the proposed policy by policymakers. In the context paid parental leave, federal politicians are key as the program is under the jurisdiction of the federal government. However, support from provincial policymakers is important in order to generate support from voters. Political feasibility is measured on a three-point scale. 'Low' political feasibility implies there is strong opposition from policymakers. 'Moderate' political feasibility implies that there is roughly equal support for and opposition to this policy from policymakers. 'High' implies policymakers are largely supportive of this policy. This criterion is evaluated using interviews with key informants, as well as inference from past policy proposals and media scans.

### **7.1.4. *Stakeholder acceptability***

The stakeholder acceptability criterion measures how the policy option is received by the public, and in particular by those most affected by the policy: parents. 'Low' implies that there is strong opposition to the policy from the public. 'Moderate' implies that some members of the public are in favour of the policy, while others are opposed to it. 'High' implies that the stakeholders in question favour the option. This criterion is evaluated

using key informant interviews and primary data collected from Canadian parenting blogs.

### **7.1.5. *Employer Acceptability***

The employer acceptability criterion measures the acceptability of the policy to employers. This criterion is measured on a three-point scale. 'Low' employer acceptability means that the policy is not acceptable to employers. 'Moderate' implies that the policy is somewhat acceptable to employers, or is acceptable to some but not others. 'High' employer acceptability means the policy is acceptable to employers. This criterion is evaluated based on information gleaned from academic literature.

### **7.1.6. *Vertical Equity***

The vertical equity criterion measures the accessibility of the policy to individuals from different income brackets. Like the previous criteria, vertical equity is measured on a three-point scale. 'Low' vertical equity means that the policy is regressive, and is not beneficial to lower income earners. 'Moderate' implies that the policy is somewhat fair for individuals of all income brackets, but perhaps only to a small degree or only in the short term. 'High' vertical equity means the policy is roughly as fair to one income bracket as it is to the others. This criterion is evaluated using secondary data and key informant interviews.

Next I provide an overview of the policy options considered for evaluation, and assess them according to the criteria discussed above.

## 8. Strong Policy Options in the Canadian Context

Table 5 illustrates each of the five policy options evaluated according to the selected criteria. Following the table is a detailed explanation of each option's definition and assessment.

**Table 5: Assessment of Policy Options**

	Status Quo	Status Quo Plus	Quebec Model	Designated Paternity Leave	HELP Model
Effectiveness	Low	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High
Scale of Cost	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High
Political Feasibility	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low
Stakeholder Acceptability	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High
Employer Acceptability	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Vertical Equity	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High

### 8.1.1. Status quo

Currently, paid parental leave benefits are offered through the federal Employment Insurance program to parents that have worked at least 600 hours in the year preceding the leave period, and that have paid into EI through payroll taxes. Leave benefits are available for 15 weeks to mothers, and the remaining 35 weeks can be shared between mothers and fathers however they choose. The benefits replace up to

55% of the previous year's income – paid on a weekly basis – to a maximum of a \$44,000 salary. Finally, benefits are available for 52 weeks after a child is born or placed with adoptive parents (Service Canada, 2011).

*Effectiveness:* The status quo ranked as 'low' in terms of effectiveness, due to unfavourable feedback from key stakeholders. The Human Early Learning Partnership's Paul Kershaw states definitively that the current model is "not effective, not working" (Personal communication, January 6, 2012). Because there is no incentive for fathers to participate in childcare and unpaid household labour, women still take on most of this burden, meanwhile still participating in paid labour after the leave period. So, mothers face the challenge of balancing multiple roles, resulting in stress and role overload.

*Scale of Cost:* Low. In terms of direct program costs, maintaining the status quo would require no increase in spending on paid parental leave benefits.

*Political Feasibility:* The status quo ranks as 'high' in terms of political feasibility. This ranking is made in consideration of the current economic climate; maintaining the status quo means no increases in spending. This is particularly important given that parental leave benefits are administered from the federal EI fund. Voters will presumably look unfavourably upon an increase in spending from this account.

*Stakeholder Acceptability:* The status quo ranks 'low' in stakeholder acceptability. This evaluation was made with regard to feedback on the current policy gleaned from blog entries on parenting websites and interviews with individuals that have utilized paid parental leave benefits in recent years. Simply put, parents, and in particular mothers, are not happy with the current policy. They feel the weekly benefit amount is too low, the one-year period is too short and that fathers do not participate in the leave period, among other complaints.

*Employer Acceptability:* The status quo ranks 'low' in employer acceptability. The basis for this ranking is that, according to past academic research and blog entries made on parenting resource websites, employers tend to look upon leaves of absence unfavourably. Indeed, employers often presume leaves of absence will be costly to their respective businesses or organizations, or that employees will not return after the leave period. As evident from the blog entries analyzed in previous sections, the employer is

sometimes a significant barrier to parents taking the full paid leave period; an employer may threaten to demote or lay off an employee should he or she take a one-year leave of absence upon the birth or adoption of a child.

*Vertical Equity.* The status quo ranks as 'low' for vertical equity. Parents that are living in poverty often opt for an early return to work after giving birth to or adopting a child, as the benefit amount is too low to provide financial security. Currently, "poor people are paying into a program that they can't use because the financial hit is too much" (Paul Kershaw, personal communication, January 6, 2012).

### **8.1.2. Quebec model**

In Quebec, benefits are available under the basic or special plan<sup>35</sup>. With the basic plan, parents may receive 70% of their previous year's salary during the leave period. Maternity benefits are paid for 18 weeks, paternity benefits for 5 weeks and shared parental leave is available for 32 weeks. Adoptive parents are given an additional 5 weeks of shared leave. Under the special plan, parents may choose to receive a higher earnings replacement in exchange for less leave. The maximum salary considered for benefits is \$66,000, as opposed to the \$44,000 salary limit set by the federal government. In terms of eligibility, all residents of Quebec that have a child and have earned at least \$2000 in insurable earnings are able to receive benefits. Finally, women experiencing pregnancy interruption may also receive benefits during the recovery period.

*Effectiveness:* The Quebec model was deemed to be moderately effective based on interviews from key stakeholders and analysis of blog entries written on parenting websites. Many Canadian parents outside of Quebec feel that this particular model is ideal, and wish for the federal government to implement a similar policy. These parents prefer the financial support provided by the Quebec model, and feel that the flexibility

<sup>35</sup> All information regarding the Quebec model was collected from Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, 2009.

and paternity leave offered by the program better reflects the needs of working parents. Other parents, in addition to some academics and advocates, feel that the Quebec model is merely “a step in the right direction”, offering little in terms of substantive change (Paul Kershaw, personal communication, January 6, 2012). The most contentious factor is the period of non-transferable paternity leave, which some feel is too short, stating that this time is “often just tacked on to family vacation time” (Paul Kershaw, personal communication, January 6, 2012). So, while this 5-week paternity leave period has been effective at increasing fathers’ use of paid leave benefits, it is not enough to encourage equal participation in childcare and household care activities.

*Scale of Cost:* In consideration of relative program costs, the Quebec model was ranked ‘moderate’. An earnings replacement of 70% and universal eligibility will increase the number of benefit recipients as well as the amount of benefit they receive. Compared to other policy options, however, these costs are not as high.

*Political Feasibility:* In the case of the Quebec model, political feasibility was considered to be ‘moderate’. The strength of this model with regard to this criterion is that it has proven to be popular in Quebec. As noted in the case study analysis, the proportion of Quebec fathers taking paid leave increased by more than 20% after the introduction of QPIP benefits in 2006 (Marshall, 2008). Moreover, parents outside of Quebec are learning of this model and have pushed for a similar policy to be implemented by the federal government. This became evident in my analysis of blog entries from parenting websites. However the increase in spending may not be considered acceptable among policy makers.

*Stakeholder Acceptability:* Stakeholder acceptability in this case was considered to be ‘moderate’ based on interviews with key stakeholders. Increasing income replacement may be deemed favourable among parents, as well the options for flexibility provided by the choice of a ‘basic’ and ‘special’ plan. However, ‘taking’ time from the leave period to designate to fathers may make some mothers that wish to take a one-year leave period unhappy.

*Employer Acceptability:* As with the status quo, the status quo plus ranked ‘low’ in terms of employer acceptability. As discussed previously, employers tend to be reluctant to



embrace leaves of absence, as they are often concerned about the cost to their business or organization and the effect on productivity.

*Vertical Equity:* In terms of vertical equity, the Quebec model ranked 'moderate' because it is a significant increase from the federal earnings replacement of 55%; however it is still too low to provide adequate financial support to new parents. As Paul Kershaw notes, "it's an improvement from the status quo, however, 70% of a low income is still not very much" (Personal communication, January 6, 2012).

### **8.1.3. Status Quo Plus**

The status quo plus is a policy option based on the responses of mothers that participated in online surveys on babycentre.ca. Baby Centre – an online resource for parents – conducted an informal survey asking mothers to contribute their suggestions for improving Canada's paid parental leave policy. Overwhelmingly, mothers cited more time and more money as factors that would improve the Canadian policy. As such, the status quo plus would provide a higher income replacement - 80% as opposed to 55% - and extend the leave period from 12 months to 18 months. This option is assessed according to the selected criteria below.

*Effectiveness:* In terms of alleviating mothers' feelings of role overload, the status quo plus was ranked as 'low' based on feedback from key stakeholders. A higher earnings replacement may be an incentive for fathers to take a paid leave of absence; however, without a designated paternity leave period, mothers will still overwhelmingly take on the majority of childcare and household care responsibilities, even upon re-entering the workforce. In an interview with Paul Kershaw, he states implementing this option would be "a disservice to women in terms of gender equality both at home and in the labour force" (Personal communication, January 6, 2012).

*Scale of Cost:* With regard to relative costs, this option is ranked 'moderate'. Direct program costs will be higher simply due to the longer leave period and a higher earnings replacement.

*Political Feasibility:* The status quo plus option ranks as 'moderate' with regard to political feasibility. While Conservative governments are largely in favour of these types

of family policies - those that don't differ greatly from the status quo - the increase in direct program costs may act as a deterrent to implementation (Paul Kershaw, personal communication, January 6, 2012). The analysis of blog entries completed for this study illustrated perceptions of government's reluctance to extend paid leave benefits. While some mothers were hopeful that an extension to the current provision might occur in the near future, others felt that families are simply not a priority for the government.

*Stakeholder Acceptability:* Mixed responses from key stakeholders led to a 'moderate' ranking for the status quo plus's stakeholder acceptability. Many parents may be satisfied with the increase in benefit and time provisions; however, mothers wishing for more paternal involvement in the home and less career interruption may view this option unfavourably. Importantly, many families will remain ineligible for benefits due to strict eligibility requirements.

*Employer Acceptability:* As with the previous policy options, the Quebec model ranks 'low' in terms of employer acceptability. Employers are typically concerned about the effect an employee taking leave will have on the costs and productivity of the business or organization, and are thus hesitant to allow employees to take extended periods of leave.

*Vertical Equity:* The status quo plus ranks as 'moderate' for vertical equity. Although a higher earnings replacement may benefit some low-income families in Canada, the 600-hour eligibility requirement and maximum benefit amount still exclude many financially strained parents from participating.

#### **8.1.4. Implement Designated Paternity Leave**

Both academics and key stakeholders – namely Canadian mothers – have noted the importance of paternal participation in childrearing. This option would modify the current paid parental leave policy by designating 5 of 35 shared parental leave weeks as paternity leave. The rest of the program would remain the same.

*Effectiveness:* In terms of effectiveness, this policy option is ranked 'moderate' based on evidence from jurisdictions such as Quebec and Denmark and interviews with key stakeholders. Like the Quebec model, this policy option may encourage more fathers to

take leave. However, the inclusion of a handful of weeks is not enough to make a fundamental change to how childcare and home care activities are shared. Moreover, Katherine Marshall (2008) notes that while proportionately more fathers take leave since the implementation of QPIP benefits in 2006, they only take the amount of time designated (5 weeks).

*Scale of Cost:* The cost of this policy option is low, as now change is required other than designating 5 of the current weeks as paternity leave.

*Political Feasibility:* In terms of political feasibility, the implementation of a non-transferable paternity leave period, as it is defined here, ranks 'high'. The rationale for this choice is that the designation gives the appearance of a drastic and progressive policy change; however, with no additional program costs it is likely to be viewed favourably by policymakers concerned about public perceptions of government spending.

*Stakeholder Acceptability:* This option ranks low for stakeholder acceptability based on interviews with key stakeholders and analysis of mothers' blog entries. By taking five weeks from mothers – who “often feel the one-year period is ‘their’ time” – this option is likely to be seen as regressive by those most affected by changes to the program (Paul Kershaw, personal communication, January 6, 2012). Moreover, parents wishing for more financial support and more time at home with a newborn will be discouraged by the lack of real change embodied by this policy.

*Employer Acceptability:* The implementation of designated paternity leave ranks as 'low' for employer acceptability. As discussed previously, employers often discourage leave-taking. This may especially be true in the case of fathers. As illustrated in the analysis of blog entries, few Canadian fathers take parental leave. Those that do are often the only father to have done so at their place of employment.

*Vertical Equity:* Implementing a designated paternity leave period within the current benefit scheme offers nothing to low-income families that earn too little to benefit from the current policy. As such, this option ranks 'low' for vertical equity.

### **8.1.5. HELP Model<sup>36</sup>**

The final policy option was developed and initially proposed by Paul Kershaw of the University of British Columbia's Human Early Learning Partnership. The leave period would be extended from 12 to 18 months, with the additional 6 months reserved exclusively for fathers. The assumption is that mothers will take the first 6 months of leave, fathers will take the final 6 months, and the other 6 months will be shared between the parents. Benefits would be administered through a benefit program external to the employment insurance program, and would provide 80% earnings replacement of a maximum salary of \$60,000. All parents would be eligible for paid leave benefits, including the self-employed, and would receive a minimum weekly benefit of \$440. Importantly, the paid leave benefits provided by the HELP model would not be administered through federal Employment Insurance funds. As such, parents would not have to endure administrative restrictions such as the two-week unpaid waiting period.

*Effectiveness:* The effectiveness of this option was determined to be 'high', based on findings from case study analyses, academic literature and feedback from key stakeholders. This model has the potential to significantly increase paternal participation in childrearing and household care by providing a paternity leave period equivalent in length to the maternity leave period and increasing both the earnings replacement rate and the maximum benefit amount. By allowing for a substantial amount of paternity leave, this policy provides the opportunity to normalize leave-taking for Canadian fathers and to increase paternal participation in childcare through extended leaves of absence. Past academic research on Quebec's QPIP benefits shows that Canadians' behaviours are highly responsive to policy changes; indeed, the number of fathers taking paternity leave rose dramatically from 2006 to 2007 following the implementation of QPIP benefits (Marshall, 2008).

*Scale of Cost:* Relative to the other policy options proposed here, the HELP model ranked 'high' in terms of direct program costs. Increases to the earnings replacement

<sup>36</sup> All information for the discussion of the HELP model was collected from Kershaw, 2005.

rates and the maximum benefit amount, in addition to the increase in eligible recipients, means direct program costs would soar well above those of the status quo. Advocates of this policy, however, note that increased program costs would be offset by spending cuts in other areas, such as health care (Paul Kershaw, Personal communication, January 6, 2012). Moreover, this study highlighted just some of the adverse physical and emotional health effects experienced by mothers dealing with feelings of role overload. Perhaps an increase in financial support and spousal participation in the home would offset some of the health care costs associated with these ailments.

*Political Feasibility:* This option ranks 'low' in terms of political feasibility. High direct program costs, particularly in today's economic climate, may cause concern among elected officials over public perceptions of government spending.

*Stakeholder Acceptability:* Based on interviews with stakeholders and analysis of blog entries, this policy option was ranked as having high stakeholder acceptability. This model would appease parents wishing to defer use of outside childcare providers by providing an additional six months of paid leave; increased earnings replacement and maximum benefit amount will satisfy families facing financial strain; and universal eligibility will allow more families to participate in a program being funded by their payroll contributions.

*Employer Acceptability:* The HELP model ranks as 'low' in terms of employer acceptability. This evaluation is made on the basis that, given that the current parental leave policy is not acceptable to employers, an extended leave period – particularly for fathers – employers will likely not embrace a more generous policy.

*Vertical Equity:* This option ranks 'high' in terms of vertical equity, as universal eligibility and a significant increase to both the earnings replacement and the maximum benefit amount mean all Canadian families receive adequate financial support during an expensive period of time.

## 9. Assessment

In the preceding section, five policy options were discussed and evaluated according to selected criteria. The current paid parental leave policy - the status quo – ranked well in terms of political feasibility and cost, but fared poorly in the remaining categories. The status quo plus ranked higher than the status quo with regard to vertical equity and public acceptability, but otherwise did not stand out as a favourable option. The Quebec model ranked moderately well in all categories, making it a slightly more palatable policy option relative to the previous models. Implementing a designated paternity leave period ranked better than the status quo only in terms of effectiveness, making this policy option largely unfavourable. All models, however, ranked low in terms of employer acceptability, as employers are often reluctant to allow employees to take an extended period of leave, due to misperceptions of the impact this absence will have on costs and productivity. Finally, the HELP model ranked the highest with regard to vertical equity, public acceptability and effectiveness, making it the highest ranked option.

In the following section I propose a final recommendation for modifying the current paid parental leave policy in order to best address working mothers' feelings of role overload.

## 10. Recommendations

### 10.1.1. *Main Advantages of Recommended Policy*

Using five criteria, five policy options were evaluated against the status quo. I determined that the HELP model would be best suited to alleviate feelings of role overload experienced by working mothers in Canada. The HELP model, more than any of the proposed policy options, provides a strong incentive for fathers to participate in the early stages of caregiving, which has positive implications for the alleviation of role overload (Coverman, 1989). There are two main advantages of the HELP model over the other suggested models:

1. The HELP model encourages equal leave-taking for mothers and fathers, an important step towards reducing role overload. Nonetheless, this model still allows for six months of flexibility to give parents the choice of how to use the benefits to best suit their preferences; if a mother wishes to take more than six months of paid leave, she may, and the same goes for fathers. It should be noted that none of the other models effectively encourage the equal use of leave for mothers and fathers. While Quebec should be commended for taking steps to normalize the use of paternity leave, a leave period of several weeks is “often just tacked on to family vacation time” and isn’t enough time for fathers to adapt to routine childcare activities such as nighttime feedings, regular playtimes and other activities central to healthy child development (Paul Kershaw, personal communication, January 2012). Ray, Gornick and Schmitt (2008) support this hypothesis, noting,

“...[A] policy that divide[s] leave and payments equally between mothers and fathers on a non-transferable, "use it or lose it" basis would help to counteract both traditional gender roles and labor-market pressures. Mothers would have job security and financial support, but would also have the expectation that fathers would provide a substantial portion of childcare”

By distributing caregiving responsibilities evenly between two caregivers, mothers have the opportunity to fill both caregiving and employee roles, knowing that some of the burden of childcare will be taken on by their significant others.

2. The HELP model, more than any of the proposed policy options, offers more financial support to parents entering an expensive chapter of their lives. The HELP model offers parents 80% of their previous years' salaries to a maximum salary of \$60,000, as well as a minimum weekly benefit amount roughly equivalent to the current policy's maximum amount. In addition to alleviating income-related stress for mothers, an increased earnings replacement and higher minimum benefit amount will likely encourage more fathers to take leave. Indeed, Katherine Marshall (2008) states, "...countries with the highest paternal participation rates include those with non-transferable leave programs that also offer high-wage replacement rates...." The extra financial support will also likely mitigate future costs related to raising children, such as childcare, education and extracurricular activities.

### ***10.1.2. Additional Strengths of Recommended Policy***

Other important aspects of this model include universal eligibility and the administration of benefits external to the federal Employment Insurance program. These factors will provide additional support to parents by eliminating the need to work 600 hours prior to receiving benefits. This is especially important for parents anticipating the birth or adoption of their second or third child; indeed, these parents may well be out of the workforce for childcare purposes, thus excluding them from receiving paid parental leave benefits under the current policy. The creation of a separate benefit program for new parents will eliminate the stigma that some parents experience when using federal EI benefits. This point was discussed in the thematic analysis of blog entries. Finally, the career interruption many women experience upon taking a leave of absence may also be ameliorated by this model; if employers expect that both their female and male employees will likely be taking a paid leave period, there may be less adverse selection in the hiring process whereby a younger male employee will be favoured over a younger female employee.



While some of the proposed policy options offered either a non-transferable paternity leave period or some combination of higher earnings replacement and a longer leave period, the HELP model incorporates all three factors, thus providing financial support to both mothers and fathers to reflect dual-earner makeup of households in Canada.

Next I conclude this study with a summary and some final remarks.

## 11. Conclusions

This study explored the role of paid parental leave benefits in the alleviation of role overload experienced by working mothers in Canada. The results illustrate that by encouraging fathers' participation in childcare in the early years, mothers are more able to balance the multiple roles of employee, parent and more. By comparing similar policies in other jurisdictions and analyzing blog entries written by Canadian mothers, researchers and policymakers can understand the limitations of the current paid parental leave policy from the perspective of those most affected by its deficiencies. Yet role overload is not only a product of an ineffective parental leave policy. It is important to recognize that workplace policies also play a role in the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, when employers fail to support leave-taking by both mothers and fathers (Fuwa, 2004; Albrecht, 2003). Many social and cultural factors influence the distribution of caregiving activities in the home, and it is important to recognize these issues in order to develop effective family policies (Marshall, 2008).

Finally, the case study analysis illustrated that simply providing paid paternity leave to fathers will not alleviate feelings of role overload. As in the case of Quebec, the take-up of paternity leave benefits may increase, however the duration of paternity leave taken may not be long enough to normalize paternal participation in the routine aspects of childrearing. In order to see a significant increase in fathers' caregiving contributions, there needs to be a fundamental shift in society's views of childrearing and family policy, whereby fathers are strongly encouraged to be equal partners in childrearing (Haas and Hwang, 2008). This shift requires an understanding of the integral role of both mothers *and* fathers in raising children. As noted throughout this study, it is essential that public policies and workplace policies reflect this change and work together to progress family-friendly policies.

## 11.1. Limitations of this Study

Several factors may have limited the research presented in this study. First, the data from the blog entries were collected online from anonymous participants, so I was unable to collect key details that would allow me to ensure a diversity of backgrounds in the participant group. For example, I was unable to determine the socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical locations of the blog contributors, so I may not have drawn upon a sample that is representative of Canadian mothers. Second, the thematic analysis of the blog entry data will inevitably have been influenced by my own knowledge and opinions of parental leave benefits, as well my personal background. For example, my particular understanding of and perspectives on the topics of role overload and paid parental leave in Canada will undoubtedly be shaped by my socioeconomic background and upbringing in Canada, and as such will have influenced how I categorized and analyzed the blog entry data. Third, the sample of mothers involved in the blog entries is not random, but rather a convenience sample. Indeed, it is possible that certain types of women are more likely to patronize parenting blogs than other women, creating an obvious bias in the data collection and analysis.

With regard to the case study analysis, most of the data drawn upon was based on survey data, and therefore may not accurately portray the use of paid parental leave benefits outside of Quebec and Canada. For example, the take-up of paternity benefits in Denmark is 62% among fathers surveyed for government research. So, the data are reliable, but perhaps not representative of take-up among all Danish fathers. Moreover, the data often do not distinguish between fathers' use of paternity leave and fathers' use of parental leave; rather, they often illustrate overall take-up rates within a jurisdiction. This is the same for all of the selected cases. Finally, limitations of scope meant that I have analyzed Canada's paid parental leave policy in isolation from other related policies, such as the Canada Child Tax Benefit and other financial subsidies for families. Looking at this policy in isolation – and comparing it with similar policies in other jurisdictions, also in isolation – does not provide a holistic view of how families are or are not supported by the Canadian government. To be sure, this study is not intended as a commentary, per se, on the Canadian government's treatment of families in Canada; rather, it is meant to illustrate areas of improvement for the paid parental leave policy in particular.

## 11.2. Suggestions for Future Research

There are several ways in which future research may aid in investigating the role of paid parental leave benefits in the alleviation of working mothers' feelings of role overload:

- Through thematic analysis of blog entries, this study illustrated that family finances and sociocultural factors influence take-up rates of paternity leave. Past research (Marshall, 2008) has shown similar results. Future research involving in-depth interviews or focus groups with Canadian fathers may highlight important social, cultural and/or religious factors in Canada influencing fathers' take-up of parental benefits.
- Quebec has been successful in encouraging fathers' use of paternity benefits. Although this study determined the Quebec model to be ultimately ineffective in encouraging the equal distribution of childcare, the success of this program in this regard may provide federal ministers with evidence of how best to adapt the current paid parental leave policy to suit the Canadian context. Future research, then, may include more longitudinal data to determine the strengths and weaknesses of this policy.
- Some jurisdictions, including Iceland, have recently implemented parental leave policies providing equal periods of leave for both mothers and fathers. Future research may illustrate the effectiveness of this program and determine positive and negative externalities associated with its implementation.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A.

### Average Weekly Benefit Paid through the Paid Parental Leave Policy<sup>37</sup>

Month/Year	Average Parental Benefit Amount (Canada)
Jan-09	348.72
Feb-09	348.86
Mar-09	349.48
Apr-09	351.07
May-09	352.09
Jun-09	353.04
Jul-09	355.8
Aug-09	356.07
Sep-09	354.92
Oct-09	355.79
Nov-09	357.52
Dec-09	357.88
Jan-10	358.93
Feb-10	359.86
Mar-10	359.05
Apr-10	361.19
May-10	362.17
Jun-10	364.15
Jul-10	366.16
Aug-10	366.13
Sep-10	365.86

<sup>37</sup> Access to benefit payment data was frozen November 25, 2011 due to inconsistencies detected following publication. The data illustrated here provide a general picture of the benefit amount paid through parental leave; however, some inaccuracies may exist. Data collected from Statistics Canada, 2011c.

## Appendix B.

### Framework Used for the Collection of Blog Entry Data

1. Can you describe your weekly routine?
  - What you do for work (type of employment, hours of work)
  - What you do with your kids (daycare, eg.)
  - How much time you spend with your kids/family outside of work?
  
2. How do you feel in terms of your ability to balance work and family commitments?
  - Feelings of being pressed for time (how often, how pressed for time)
  
3. Effects on personal life
  - Relationship with employer/work
  - Relationship with spouse
  - Relationship with children
  - Feelings about yourself
  
4. Have you ever used the paid parental leave benefits available through the federal EI program?  
If yes:
  - Can you describe your experiences (application process, how much you received, how much time you used, goods/bads)
  - How did the use of these benefits affect you and your relationships?
  
5. If not, what were the reasons?
  
6. How might the parental leave program be improved/modified?
  - More time?
  - More money?
  - Changes to application process?
  - Changes to eligibility requirements?
  
7. Any other feelings/comments regarding work-life balance, role overload, paid parental leave?