

Parental Leave Policies and Family Well-being: A Comparative Analysis of Work-Life Balance Across Nations

Rina Anjani¹, Dewi Sartika²

^{1,2} Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Indonesia

Abstract: *This study investigates the impact of parental leave policies on family well-being and work-life balance. By comparing parental leave durations, compensation rates, and eligibility criteria across various countries, the research explores how different policies affect parental mental health, family bonding, and gender equality in the workplace. Findings suggest that comprehensive parental leave policies contribute to stronger family bonds and reduced stress, benefiting both parents and children.*

Keywords: *Parental leave, family well-being, work-life balance, gender equality, mental health.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, parental leave policies have emerged as a critical aspect of social policy aimed at improving family well-being and fostering work-life balance. Parental leave policies vary significantly worldwide in terms of leave duration, compensation levels, and eligibility criteria, with profound implications for families and societies. These policies play a vital role in shaping family dynamics, gender equality, mental health, and overall satisfaction for both working parents and their children.

Parental leave provides parents with time to care for newborns and strengthens family bonds, while also supporting the mental and physical health of both parents and infants. This study compares parental leave policies across countries to identify how varying levels of support influence family well-being, gender equality, and economic stability. The objective is to understand the ways in which parental leave policies shape work-life balance and family satisfaction, and to explore the policy structures that offer the most comprehensive support for working families.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental leave policies are rooted in the principle of supporting families and ensuring the well-being of both parents and children. According to O'Brien and Wall (2017), adequate parental leave can reduce stress and improve mental health for both mothers and fathers, while inadequate leave can have long-term negative effects on family dynamics and parental mental health. The World Health Organization (WHO) has highlighted that the first year of a child's

life is critical for healthy development, making parental leave essential for fostering early family bonds and stable child development.

Haas and Hwang (2018) argue that equitable parental leave promotes gender equality by encouraging shared parenting responsibilities, which in turn helps reduce the career penalty often faced by women who take time off work to care for children. Similarly, Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt (2016) indicate that paid and prolonged parental leave leads to better health outcomes for parents and children, emphasizing the need for countries to adopt policies that minimize economic stress on families.

In Southeast Asia, the implementation of parental leave policies varies, with Indonesia and other developing nations often providing shorter and less comprehensive leave options compared to European countries, which typically offer more substantial support. As Anjani et al. (2019) note, the availability of parental leave is often correlated with economic development and cultural factors that influence family structure and workforce participation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a comparative approach to examine the impact of different parental leave policies on family well-being. Data was collected from governmental reports, international organizations, and academic literature to analyze policies in countries with varying levels of support, such as Sweden, Japan, Indonesia, and the United States. Key variables considered in the analysis include:

- a. Leave Duration: The amount of time granted for parental leave.
- b. Compensation Rate: The percentage of salary provided during the leave period.
- c. Eligibility Criteria: Requirements for parental leave, including full-time employment or citizenship.

The research involves both qualitative analysis and quantitative data comparisons. Interviews with 20 working parents in Indonesia provided insights into the personal experiences and challenges faced by parents on parental leave. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of how policy differences affect parental and family well-being across various cultural and economic contexts.

4. RESULTS

The comparative analysis of parental leave policies revealed significant variations in terms of leave duration, compensation, and impact on family well-being. Key findings include:

- a. **Extended Leave Benefits:** Countries with longer parental leave policies, such as Sweden and Germany, showed higher levels of parental satisfaction, reduced stress, and stronger family bonds. Swedish parents reported feeling more supported and less anxious about returning to work, suggesting that generous policies contribute to overall family stability.
- b. **Gender Equality:** In countries where parental leave is equally accessible to both parents, there is greater gender equality within households. In Japan, where both parents have access to parental leave, fathers are more involved in child-rearing. This results in more balanced parenting responsibilities and reduced career disruption for mothers. Conversely, in countries with less support for fathers, such as Indonesia, women are more likely to experience career setbacks.
- c. **Mental Health and Family Bonding:** In the U.S., where parental leave is largely unpaid and limited, parents reported higher levels of stress and anxiety about balancing work and family obligations. In contrast, paid leave options in Finland led to improved mental health outcomes, with parents feeling more confident and connected to their children. This supports findings by Haas and Hwang (2018) that well-supported leave leads to better mental health.
- d. **Challenges in Indonesia:** Indonesian parents indicated that limited leave duration and low compensation levels make it difficult to balance work and family life effectively. Many respondents noted that the current policy of three months of paid leave for mothers and no leave for fathers places a heavy burden on mothers, affecting family well-being and work-life balance negatively.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that comprehensive parental leave policies are crucial in promoting family well-being and achieving work-life balance. Countries with robust policies, like Sweden and Finland, demonstrate that generous parental leave can reduce family stress, foster stronger parental bonds, and improve the mental health of parents. These policies not only benefit families but also contribute to societal outcomes, as parents are better able to raise healthy, well-adjusted children without sacrificing career stability.

In contrast, countries with minimal parental leave policies face challenges in supporting family well-being. The United States, for instance, does not mandate paid parental leave, creating financial stress for families and contributing to lower levels of parental satisfaction and work-life balance. Anjani et al. (2019) suggest that to enhance family well-being, countries

like Indonesia should consider expanding leave options to support fathers as well as mothers, allowing for a more equitable distribution of childcare responsibilities and reducing the career penalty for women.

Implementing equitable parental leave policies is also a step towards gender equality. By enabling both parents to take time off work, societies can shift cultural expectations around caregiving and reduce the stigma associated with parental leave for fathers. This shift is critical for developing countries like Indonesia, where traditional gender roles still heavily influence family dynamics.

6. CONCLUSION

Parental leave policies play a pivotal role in promoting family well-being, mental health, and work-life balance. The comparative analysis in this study reveals that countries with comprehensive parental leave policies not only support parents in their caregiving roles but also foster gender equality and long-term family stability. While developed countries like Sweden offer ideal models with paid, extended leave and high parental satisfaction, developing countries can learn from these approaches to improve their own policies.

For Indonesia, expanding parental leave and including provisions for fathers could significantly improve family well-being, reduce the economic burden on parents, and promote a more balanced approach to caregiving. Investing in such policies would not only benefit individual families but also contribute to broader social and economic development. Future research should explore the long-term effects of improved parental leave policies on child development and family dynamics in Indonesia and similar contexts.

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