

Leeds University Business School: Research and Innovation Podcast

International Women's Day 2023: Episode 1

Speakers: Emily Humphreys and Clare Matysova

[00:00:00] **Emily:** Hi, and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Emily Humphreys and I'm a PhD researcher at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, as well as working in public health. And I'm delighted to be joined today by Clare Matysova over, who is also a PhD researcher, at the University of Leeds, and we're going to be talking today about shared parental leave.

[00:00:25] **Clare:** Hi. Thanks for having me.

[00:00:26] **Emily:** So this is all in the context of the International Women's Day 2023 campaign - Embrace Equity - which is asking whether equal opportunities are enough to achieve social justice or whether we should be aspiring to social justice driven by principles of equity. And shared parental leave's a really interesting example of this.

But I thought maybe it would be helpful to start with just a basic explanation of what we are talking about when we compare equality and equity. And the idea I always use for thinking about this is a playing field. If everybody is playing by the same rules, that's equality. But if it's not a level playing field and some people have to run uphill, they're going to find it harder to succeed, so it's not equity. How do you think about this idea, Clare?

[00:01:13] **Clare:** Thanks Emily. So, as you said, I'm a student at the University of Leeds. I also work in an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion role at the University of Aberdeen. So, this topic's quite, is really important to me, both in my work and my research.

And in terms of thinking about EDI, so historically, tackling inequalities has often been associated with kind of institutional compliance with equality legislation, you know, driven by the Equality Act. And having an equality of opportunity focus, often kind of initiative led focusing on individuals. But over the last few years has increasingly recognized that diversity work needs to go beyond that compliance, neutral equality of opportunities approach.

So, giving another scenario to yours, Emily. One that I often think about is, you know, if everyone's given an opportunity to apply for an unpaid internship, for example, it looks like, yeah, it's equality of opportunity, but actually when you dig beneath the surface, not everyone can apply for that unpaid internship because of the different context within which they're working.

And so really we need to like, dig beneath and understand what those barriers are. And we've seen a lot, you know, in anti-racism work, recognizing the need to identify structural and systemic inequities. And so we've seen a kind of much more an emphasis on proactive anti-racist strategies appreciating the different starting points in context.

So if we think about gender equality and International Women's Day and we focus on gender, I think about you know, the gender pay gaps is the thing that's often raised and that really provides a

snapshot of outcome inequities that we see in any given setting, whether it's the UK or a particular employer.

And what I wanted to focus on, where we wanted to talk about, why we wanted to talk about shared parental leave and parental leave is because the gender pay gap is linked very much to transition to parenthood. And it's that pay gap significantly increases what on the transition to parenthood.

And that is like, you can understand the impact of maternity leave, career breaks, working part-time, flexible working on women's careers. That's the outcome of that is that gender pay gap. Yeah.

[00:03:22] **Emily:** That's really interesting, Clare. And actually, I think the gender pay gap isn't the only dimension of inequality here. So leave could be related to not only pay, but also having employment at all.

It could be related to poverty, it could be related to lots of different health outcomes, things like uptake of breastfeeding. There's also plenty of research out there that says that it's related to infant mortality. And the gender pay gap is just one dimension of all of these different impacts of different types of parental leave.

So there's lots of different potential effects. And different countries have different arrangements in place for their leave, often for different reasons as well. Different governments might want to introduce leave because they're trying to reduce poverty, because they want to improve gender equity, because they want to improve fertility.

Quite a context-specific set of arrangements. And to start with, could you provide a summary of what the family leave offer is in the UK?

[00:04:25] **Clare:** So, yeah, it's quite a complex picture as it is in most countries. So in the UK context, just to give a very kind of basic summary, expectant mothers or primary carers are eligible to leave regardless of the length of employment service. And that period of leave is relatively long when you compare it to other countries. So it's a relatively long period of up to 52 weeks.

But if you then look at paid maternity leave or parental leave, so the statutory well-paid parental leave provision within the UK, it's comparatively low. So the leave is relatively long, but the paid, the well-paid bit is relatively low - only six weeks. Which roughly kind of matches wage replacement.

And the other important factor as well is that eligibility is based on continuous employment with the same employer for that six weeks statutory higher rate of pay. Then you would then go on to a lower base rate, kind of flat rate pay for the remainder of that paid period.

Expectant fathers and non-birth mothers, partners, are entitled to two weeks' statutory paternity or partner leave. And again, that's a low rate of pay. That's flat rate. So it's not, doesn't match your wage.

And then we have shared parental leave, which was introduced in 2015, which enables parents to share up to 50 weeks, of 37 of which are paid. But that's based on curtailment or transfer of maternity leave. So from the mother, primary carer, to the father. And again, there's eligibility criteria. And neither paternity or shared parental leave include a statutory well-paid element.

[00:05:57] **Emily:** So it's a really quite complicated picture with different entitlements for different parents, different entitlements for pay and time off work with job protection. And maybe quite difficult to navigate for some parents. How does equality and equity play out in this policy?

[00:06:14] **Clare:** Again, so, in trying to, even trying to summarize it, you can see it's quite a complex picture. And there's as you mentioned, you know, there's the specific context within the country, historical, you know, the motivations that policy makers are driven by. And if we look at our, like, maternity leave largely being determined by primary care status or predominantly by gender.

And so whether you're an expectant mother or an expectant father, so this is based historically on a focus on maternity rights and maternity protections. So if we think about that in terms of equity or equality, that might, we might recognize that as kind of equity, recognizing the specific needs of a group i.e. women taking maternity leave and the physiological needs around that.

And then if we look out in comparison, shared parental leave, so that's articulated when it was introduced as giving parents the choice. So you know, suggesting that parents are able to share that 50 weeks, it suggests in that articulation it just suggests equality of opportunity. But when you dig beneath the surface of the policy, no, it's dependent on, again, on maternal transfer. So it's still based on that historical focus on maternity rights.

And if we look at another kind of element to the leave, and I mentioned eligibility when I was talking about the different, the maternity and parental leave rights in the UK, so eligibility is a key kind of factor as well, and a barrier.

So eligibility to well paid leave is dependent, as I said, on continuous employment service. So that means if, for example, you are on precarious contracts you're moving between one contract and another, and you don't have that continuous service with one employer, you might not be eligible to that well-paid leave. So this is really important, thinking about that kind of intersectionality with other factors such as gender.

And we think about our sector, university sector, you know, there's a very high proportion of academics, especially, on fixed-term contracts. And that leaves, you know, to difficulties in terms of planning and that kind of thing - family leave, family planning.

So yeah, so the UK doesn't have equal entitlement for both fathers and mothers to take leave. But when we compare it to other countries where there is more equal entitlement, it still doesn't necessarily lead to equal take-up. So it's thinking about the cultural norms as well.

[00:08:25] **Emily:** Yeah, there's some really interesting evidence on this, isn't there? And most of the research does suggest that in order to get more dads to take up their leave entitlement, it really has to be on a "use it or lose it" basis, because there are so many cultural and employment and social barriers to dads wanting to take up leave, or feeling able to take up leave, that unless it's specifically ringfenced for them, with good pay in place, it can be quite difficult for some dads to take it up even if they might otherwise want to.

So, is there another way of thinking about what we are really trying to achieve with our family policy?

[00:09:06] **Clare:** So, as mentioned at the beginning, I'm a PhD student at the University of Leeds, and my research focuses on shared parental leave, and how parents decide whether they want to share how they negotiate sharing or not. And in my research, I draw on Nancy Fraser, who does a lot of work around conceptualizing social justice. And she questions what gender justice looks like and how it should be achieved.

And she does that by conceptualizing three models. So there's a model which focuses on equality, so similar to what we've been talking about, and very much saying that as you know, in different context when we apply that model as a focus on equality of opportunities within the employment context, and what she terms "the universal breadwinner". So, so getting everyone into employment.

In contrast to that is a focus on social justice in terms of difference. So we're, in which case we're recognizing different needs of different groups and here recognizing the needs of caregivers and what she terms caregiver parity.

So you recognize that what she terms feminine life patterns through right-to-care policies. And looking at establishing caregiver parity. So, caregiving is recognized on a par with employment, paid-employment. And what she does is she, in that kind of critique, is she recognizes the intrinsic kind of contradictions in both of those models, that neither model recognizes or values caregiving enough to bring men into it.

And what we have in effect is if we are using a kind of universal breadwinner model, but we still have caregivers trying to balance their caregiving and work is that they end up on a second level. Whereas in the family kind of caregiver parity model, we end up exacerbating gender parenting norms and expectations.

So what she proposes is an alternative principle of what she calls "universal caregiver" which aims to bring men into care. But the important point is it's not simply about bringing men into care and giving men kind of like that specific leave, maybe the "use it or lose it" leave.

It's about the underpinning kind of normative principles that are aspirational in that they value caregiving and they challenge historic androcentric cultural values. So in my research, which I mentioned focuses on parents' negotiation, a couple of kind of findings that are coming out of my research are around leave being based on maternal transfer perpetuating assumptions about mothers and fathers' aspirations to share leave or not to share leave.

As well as there not being really change in the context - the policy doesn't change the risks around taking leave. So whereas mothers have been taking leave and then the consequences on career as we see in the gender pay gap, simply giving men leave doesn't take away those risks.

So really they're ending up sharing the risk. And there's a lot of research that's been done around the impact on taking leave or father's reluctance to take leave, or be more visible as carers in the workplace because of the potential impact on them.

[00:12:07] **Emily:** I've seen some research that's looked into comparing leave around Europe and it says that the UK is one of the furthest away from having a universal caregiver model. Why do you think that is?

[00:12:20] **Clare:** Well, as I mentioned in just trying to describe the leave offer, we've got a six weeks well-paid leave which clearly doesn't reflect value attributed to caregiving. It's a relatively short period. And then we've got the stark disparity between that 52 weeks maternity leave and two weeks paternity. So it's a very kind of gendered basis in which the leave is framed.

So, shared parental leave was introduced in 2015 promoted to give parents increased choice, as I mentioned, but take-up is really low. Approximately about 3% of eligible dads are taking it up. And it's not because they don't wish to share caregiving. You know, there's research that's showing that dads are more and more wanting to take leave, to share that caregiving. But due to barriers such as the finances, so that low-paid element, limited eligibility, concerns about impact on father's careers. So as I mentioned, it's that risk bit that hasn't been addressed through the policy or the policy implementation.

So the cited reasons for low take up for of shared parental leave by fathers are effectively the known negative impacts experienced by women on maternity leave and contributing factors to the gender pay gap.

So neither maternity leave or shared parental leave values caregiving or challenges the cultural biases. So while on the surface it might look like a shared leave might look like a universal caregiver model in its articulation, it's got many flaws in terms of actually how the policy looks and is implemented.

And that contrast is quite stark when you look at other countries where you, like you say, there are well-paid jobs protected, use it or lose it, non-transferable leave, which goes alongside the proactive promotion of active fathering to increase take up, which has contributed to reducing the negative impact on maternity leave as well, and reducing the gender pay gap. It's evidenced in other countries.

[00:14:17] **Emily:** So what would a practical solution look like to try to improve things?

[00:14:23] **Clare:** So obviously there's the kind of looking at the policy and there's a lot of campaigns, various campaigns, calling on the government to improve the policy. And they did do a consultation that was a couple of years ago on the shared parental leave policy, but I can't see it's likely to see a shift in the near future.

And because new case, statutory well-paid leave is relatively short there's a, as I mentioned earlier, reliance on enhancement by employers. So I think there's a lot that employers can do in terms of enhancing longer well-paid leave. The issue with that obviously is that we have considerable variability between employers in the UK.

But if we look at recent benchmarking reports, so we can see that approximately 48% of the responding employers in now enhanced shared parental leave which nearly doubled from 25 in 2017. And employers are increasingly enhancing and actually offering equalized parental leave.

And in terms of thinking about that eligibility criteria, and, you know, the barriers that that creates to eligibility to parental leave. So in the, again, thinking about the university sector, a number of universities have actually start changing that parental eligibility to be a day-one right. So, for example, Newcastle, Oxford, Cambridge. And then there's more to do as well around the cultural

side and the employer implementation around making these policies more accessible and raising awareness of entitlements.

And there's a big kind of role that culture has. When we think about the, you know, the risks that are experienced by people taking leave around career and impact on career, for example, I like the work that Charlotte Faircloth does. So she does some work on intensive parenting and what she describes as motherhood's kind of put up on this pedestal where it's almost put up as a sacred endeavour. But that in the workplace, it's not valued to that same level. So that kind of real stark, the kind of ironic contrast there is of pressure to take the leave, but it's not valued.

And we too often hear comments and prejudice in the work context, which devalues caregiving. You know, we're prioritizing time with baby. Your new-born is positioned in direct conflict with work risks, employment security and career progression, prejudice against mothers and fathers in the workplace. And things like, saying well, you know, it's down to choice to have a child, but not supporting parents and valuing the importance of that time off.

So an equity approach would really look to be removing the structural barriers arising from that binary, kind of, gendered leave framework around valuing what parents are doing when they're taking that time off, making it more visible and making it okay to be more visible, and reducing the risks associated with taking leave.

And really an equity underpinned approach to parental leave not only gives employers a strategy to tackle gender pay gap, for example, but it's around wellbeing, like you mentioned Emily. And provides employer strategies around recruitment and retention and those kind of areas as well.

[00:17:24] **Emily:** So lots of reasons for doing something about this and lots of opportunities as well.

Thanks so much, Clare. That's been so interesting. There's so much to think about here, you know, not only for governments, but also for employers and also for families as well. It's been a great discussion. I've really enjoyed it. Thank you to everybody who's been listening, and if you'd like to get in touch with us, our contact details are on the podcast website.

[00:17:47] **Clare:** Thanks Emily. Thanks for hosting and goodbye everyone. Thank you for listening.