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Leave Policy System in Russia: Is It Time to Change?

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ABSTRACT

As a demographic and family policy measure, the parental leave system is flexible in many countries. For example, parents can take full or partial leave, choose shorter leave with higher payments or vice versa; leave can be taken by other relatives of the child. In Russia, the labor legislation regulates only one of such flexible parameters—taking full or partial parental leave by not only the mother, but also the father or other relatives of the child. To study social attitudes towards the existing system of parental leave in Russia, we surveyed 506 male and 265 female employees of different organizations with and without children. To explore barriers in the system of the parental leave regulation, we carried out a content analysis of employees' complaints published on the [онлайнинспекция.рф](https://onlineinspektsiya.ru) website and analysed five cases of breaching parental leave regulations extracted from popular Russian mass media. Our results demonstrate discrepancies between the existing system of parental leave and respondents' attitudes to its legal regulation. To address the problem, the system should be transformed to embrace flexibility. To foster the transformation, the government may promote conscious and responsible fatherhood and integrate the social institute of the labor market in the demographic policy.

KEYWORDS

parental leave, paternity leave, parental leave policy, leave-takers, leave policy legislation

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Introduction

In recent decades, parental leave—similar to economic support measures—has become one of the most important instruments of many countries' demographic policies. By parental leave, we imply those periods when a mother (or other relatives of the child) focuses on parental functions.

In world practice, there are 3 types of leave—maternity leave, which is usually given to a woman before and after the childbirth; paternity leave, which can be taken only by fathers (e.g., it is provided in Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Latvia, Spain, etc.); and parental leave, a gender-neutral type, which can be used by both parents (or other relatives of the child as provided by some countries).

Historically, the formation of the leave system was accompanied with the intense involvement of women in the economy (Canaan et al., 2022). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women worked for industrial facilities on equal terms with men. In order to protect the mother's and future child's health, some governments initiated measures for the pregnant women's security. The first country that in 1877 restricted the recruitment of pregnant women was Switzerland. Employers were not allowed to recruit women 2 weeks prior and 6 weeks after the childbirth. Over the following 30 years, similar laws were adopted in Germany, Hungary, Austria, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark (Wikander et al., 1995). Still, the term "maternity leave" (or "pregnancy and delivery leave") appeared in legislation much later. Initially, 168-day pregnancy and delivery leave was introduced in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1917. In Europe, maternity leave acquired normative status 2 years later, when the International Labour Organization approved the Maternity Protection Convention (O'Neill & Johns, 2009).

Over time, there was initiated the so-called parental leave. Unlike maternity leave, its key aim was to secure labor rights of employees who had to be absent from work to take care of the child or children. Parental leave was considered an employment guarantee, as the employee's position and salary level were secured whereas the risk of job loss or labor discrimination was reduced (Valentova, 2019).

Finally, at the end of the last century, there appeared paternity leave and paternity quotas. European governments introduced paternity quotas to encourage fathers' involvement in the child rearing. The first country to pilot paternity quotas in 1993 was Norway. Later, other countries—for example, Sweden, Iceland, and Spain—followed suit (Canaan et al., 2022).

At present, the parental leave system exists in all OECD countries, excluding the USA. Parental leave policy is an essential element in the family policy structure in many developing countries (ILO, 2012). It is closely related to employment policy (protecting employees on the labor market), gender equality policy (involving fathers in the child rearing), and demographic policy. Many researchers point out a positive influence of parental leave on increasing the birth rate in the country (Ekberg et al., 2013; Kotila et al., 2014). Firstly, when fathers take leave, the burden traditionally borne by women decreases. The reduced level of mothers' anxiety and stress positively impacts reproductive intentions of women, who will most likely decide to have the

second and subsequent child. Secondly, employment security allows women not to postpone the childbirth, as parental leave almost eliminates the risk of a job loss in case of pregnancy or having children.

The fact that parental leave is interrelated with other policies determines a special research interest in leave; in recent years, the topic has been increasingly studied by foreign researchers (Kosłowski, 2019; Kurowska, 2019; Meil et al., 2019; Moss & O'Brien, 2019). Particular attention is paid to maternity leave and how it affects women's professional development (Bartoš & Pertold-Gebicka, 2018; Wood & Neels, 2019); however, fatherhood and paternity leave also attract increasing interest (Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Duvander & Lammi-Taskula, 2011; Lappegård, 2008; Rostgaard & Lausten, 2015). Some researchers study how parental leave (Jou et al., 2020) and leave to care for sick children are granted to single parents. Traditionally, parental leave has been considered an instrument to close the gender gap by fostering women's engagement in professional labor and men's contribution to parental labor simultaneously. At the same time, a parental leave policy, where at least some types of leave are paid, is a critical element of a comprehensive family support policy.

The year of 2004 saw the establishment of The International Network on Leave Policies and Research (LP&R), which studies parental leave in participating countries. The organization involves 60 experts in employment, family, and gender policies from 47 countries; it provides annual reviews on parental leave policies in these countries. The review covers maternity, paternity, parental leave, and some other types of leave (e.g., to care for a sick family member). According to the data presented in the 2021 Annual Review (Kosłowski et al., 2021), we can identify several criteria which determine specificities and differences in parental leave policies of various countries. These are such criteria as, for example, the following:

1. Availability/lack of a certain type of leave. For example, popular maternity leave is not available in Sweden, Norway, Portugal, and New Zealand. Paternity leave as a separate type of leave is not regulated in Germany, Iceland, Serbia, and Slovakia. Russia provides two types of leave—pregnancy and delivery leave (known as maternity leave in other countries) and childcare leave (in the academic literature, it is also referred to as parental leave). Paternity leave as such is not available in Russia, but fathers are eligible for the full childcare leave or its part.

2. Duration of leave. The duration of leave may significantly vary in different countries. The international and European legislation establishes the minimum leave duration. For example, according to the ILO Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183), the minimum maternity leave period is 14 weeks (International Labour Organization, 2000); however, not all countries follow these recommendations. In European countries, the duration of leave must be at least 4 months, which is stipulated in the Directive 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the European Council (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2019). The leave duration in the UK is 4.2 months, which is the shortest out of all European countries. The longest leave duration is recorded in Germany, where parents are eligible for 72 months of parental leave (only 28 of them are paid). In Russia, the childcare leave duration is 36 months, but only half of this period is paid.

3. Payment. The amount of parental leave benefits is established by each country individually. In most of the countries, it depends on the salary level of the employee with children. There are two types of payments—"paid" and "well-paid". In the former case, the level of benefit accounts for less than 66% of the employee's income level; in the latter case, 66% and more. However, there are countries where parental leave is completely non-paid. These are, particularly, the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, and Israel.

4. Flexibility elements. By flexibility elements, we imply specific parental leave points, which make it more convenient to use. In particular, these are the following:

- opportunity to take leave fully or partially to keep working part-time;
- opportunity to choose a shorter leave with a higher payment and vice versa;
- opportunity to take leave by other relatives of the child;
- opportunity to adjust leave duration depending on the number of children born;
- opportunity to choose periods of leave to use at some particular age of the child, and so on.

These flexibility elements are integrated in parental leave policies of different countries. For example, in Spain, Poland, and the Czech Republic, maternity leave may be also used by the father; in the Great Britain, Latvia, and New Zealand, parental leave may be granted to two parents simultaneously. Some countries provide so-called "maternity and paternity quotas", which divide parental leave between parents—some particular periods are allotted to the mother only and then to the father; the time left may be used by either of parents. For example, maternity and paternity quotas in Sweden are 90 days each (out of 480 leave days). Similar quotas are provided in Norway, where both parents are allotted from 15 to 19 weeks of parental leave.

In Russia, in turn, the labor legislation provides for only one flexibility element—childcare leave (analogous to parental leave in other countries) may be used fully or partially by not only the mother, but also the father or other relative of the child. Other elements of flexibility—for example, choosing a shorter leave with a higher payment or using leave by both parents simultaneously—are not stipulated. Today, when women are more economically proactive, the lack of these elements may trigger a conflict between work and family and negatively affect the future potential of the demographic situation in the country.

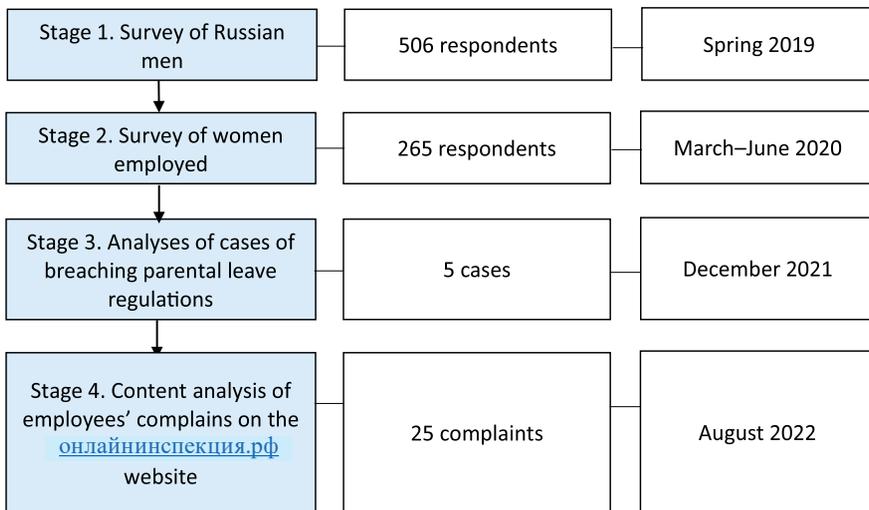
Our study aims to evaluate the state regulation of the parental leave policy in Russia and public attitudes to the policy pursued. As the parental leave system is a multi-faceted phenomenon related to different spheres of social and economic reality, we attempt to explore the problem in our research from different perspectives taking into consideration ideas of three key stakeholders of the leave system. The status of the first two stakeholders we attribute to the representatives of the family subsystem—mothers (including potential), who are the major leave-takers in Russia, and fathers (including potential), who are eligible for parental leave on an equal basis with mothers. The third key element is the representatives of the professional labor sphere—employers, whose interests are directly influenced by the parental leave system, as employers allow working parents to "leave" the sphere of professional labor to have time for parental labor.

Data and Methods

The study can be divided into three stages (Figure 1). To study the problem comprehensively, we used the mixed-method research; the approach presupposes using both quantitative and qualitative research methods simultaneously, which not only complement, but also reinforce each other (Johnson et al., 2007). In the academic literature, the use of several approaches together is referred to as methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1970). Researchers argue that it contributes to increasing the validity of empirical research results and allows gaining a systematic understanding of the problem explored (Kosharnaya & Kosharnyy, 2016).

Figure 1

Logical Structure of Studying Regulation of the Parental Leave Policy in Russia



To clarify, we would describe each stage in more detail.

Stage 1. We analysed Russian men’s willingness for the future paternity labor, parental functions. We also identified their opinion on taking parental leave when the child is born. The survey was carried out in the spring of 2019; we surveyed 506 men aged 18 to 49 with and without children. We chose this age category because in Russia it is considered a period of potentially becoming a father. For the further analysis, we chose 2 questions which deal with young people’s attitudes towards parental leave and childcare: “What would you think of the opportunity to take leave?” and “Are you planning to take care of your children right after they are born?” (for men without children). Additionally, we found out whether respondents were aware of the opportunity to take leave by the father and men’s attitude towards leave taken by fathers (to that end, we asked the following question: “How would you feel if your relative/ friend/someone you know decided to take childcare leave or its part after becoming

a father?"). For the subsequent analysis, we determined subgroups of fathers with and without children. It was important to observe the strength of stereotypes about the use of parental leave among those men who were not fathers yet. We proceeded from the fact that they lacked experience as fathers, and thus their parental strategies were not fully developed yet and could change under the influence of a policy aimed at promoting proactive fatherhood.

Stage 2. To evaluate public opinion on the flexibility of the Russian parental leave system, in March–June 2020, we surveyed women working for different companies in the Sverdlovsk Region ($n = 265$). The Sverdlovsk Region is an industrial region of Russia with a population of 4.264 million people. We surveyed women aged 18 to 49 with children ($n = 191$) and without them ($n = 74$). To measure the sample, we used data on the employment in the region provided by the Federal State Statistics Service (the Sverdlovsk Region branch). And importantly, the survey stage took place in the coronavirus pandemic and the global self-isolation period. The online format of the survey caused some discrepancies between the structure of respondents and the previously determined sample. The share of working women with children proved to be considerably higher than that in the sample. Deviations in the age structure of women did not exceed 10 percentage points.

Subsequently, we selected answers of women with children as they already had experience of taking childcare leave. We chose questions aimed at studying working women's opinions on paternity leave. Particularly, we asked respondents whether it is necessary to legally regulate paternity leave in Russia: "Many European countries adopted the so-called 'paternity leave'—a childcare period, which is granted to fathers only and cannot be taken by mothers. Do you think this type of leave should be stipulated in the Russian legislation?" The second question was formulated in the following manner: "If paternity leave was legally provided in our country, do you think your family would use it?"

Stage 3. To analyse barriers in the parental leave state regulation, in December 2021, we analysed 2012–2021 cases of breaching parental leave regulations extracted from popular Russian mass media. Additionally, in August 2022, we carried out a content analysis of employees' complaints published on the website [онлайнинспекция.рф](https://onlineinspektsiya.rf). This e-service is a part of a large-scale Russian project *Otkrytaia inspektsiia truda* [Public Labor Inspection] pursued by the Federal Service for Labor and Employment. It is designed to collect complaints of citizens, whose rights on the labor market were violated. As part of our research, we analysed 25 working fathers' complaints (the entire data set) from different regions of Russia about the violation of their rights in terms of the parental leave usage in 2014–2022.

Results

Russian men aged 18 to 49 have opposing views to paternity leave. Their opinions divide almost in half—both about being aware of paternity leave as such and about its usage by the man himself or other people. As many as 52.8% of men are aware that Russia provides childcare leave to fathers (Table 1). Of the respondents,

41.7% are to some extent positive about taking paternity leave by their relatives/friends/people they know. Curiously, the share of those willing to take paternity leave themselves is higher than that of those who are positive about others taking paternity leave—54.3% versus 41.7%. At the same time, less than a half of the respondents without children at the moment of the study—43.4% of men—are planning to take care and raise their child since they are born. It should be noted that the awareness of the opportunity to take leave and the men’s attitude to leave taken by a father, as shown in Table 1, is quite sustained and has nothing to do with the presence or absence of children. Additionally, there is not any relationship between these ideas and the number of children and the family’s income. A positive attitude towards taking leave themselves is most evident in extreme groups based on the income self-evaluation.

Table 1
Awareness of the Opportunity to Take Leave by Fathers and Male Respondents’ Attitudes to It

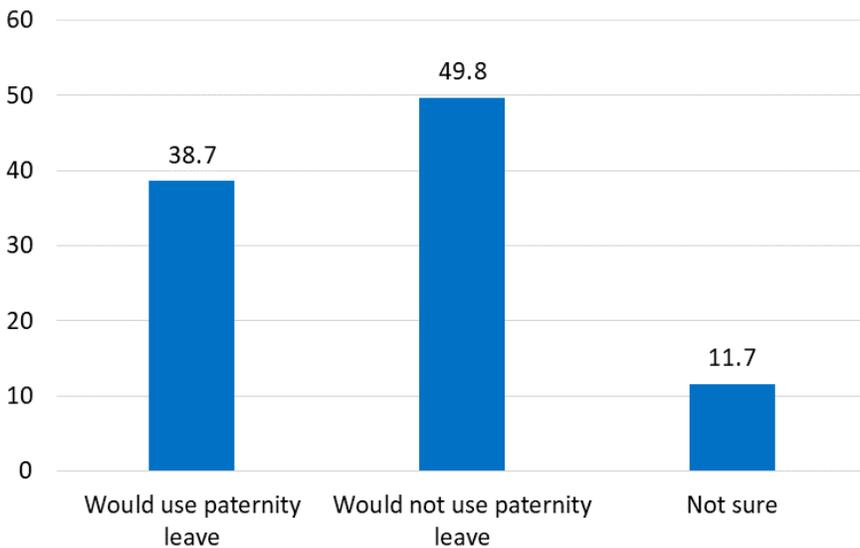
Variables	Groups and subgroups of men aged 18–49	Options	Share of answers, %	Statistical significance of differences between subgroups of respondents (chi-square test of significance)
Awareness of the opportunity to use childcare leave	With and without children/subgroups based on the income self-evaluation	Are aware	52.8	0.392/0.944
		Are not aware	47.2	
Attitude to parental leave taken by a relative, friend, etc.	With and without children/subgroups based on the income self-evaluation	Rather positive	41.7	0.575/0.305
		Neutral	19.8	
		Rather negative	38.5	
Attitude to taking parental leave himself	With and without children/subgroups based on the income self-evaluation	Positive	54.3	0.558/0.011
		Negative	45.7	
Plans on contributing to child-rearing since birth	Without children	Yes	29.4	—
		Rather yes	14.0	
		Not sure	15.4	
		Rather no	20.6	
		No	20.6	

According to the survey of working women, the overwhelming majority of mothers surveyed (83.1%) is aware that childcare leave may be taken by the father or other relatives of the child. More than a half of mothers surveyed advocate for legislating paternity leave (Table 2).

Table 2*Respondents' Answers on Whether Paternity Leave Should be Legislated, %*

Options	Share of answers
Yes	58.2
No	35.2
Not Sure	6.6
Total	100.0

More than a third of mothers surveyed claim that their family would use paternity leave if it existed in Russia (Figure 2), which, in turn, may implicitly testify to the fact that the parental leave policy in Russia should be reformed.

Figure 2*Mothers' Answers on Taking Paternity Leave If It Existed in Russia, %*

We analysed 25 complaints of working fathers published on the онлайнинспекция.рф website (Table 3). In 20 cases, fathers were denied the right for childcare leave. Most notably, employers either did not specify the reason for the denial or ignored employees' applications for childcare leave. Among the reasons for rejecting was a lack of blood relationship between the worker and their child, mother's unemployment, and gender assumptions (leave has to be taken by women, not men). We would like to highlight that all these reasons do not comply with the Russian legislation. Fathers also mentioned other violations of their labor rights, which they faced on childcare leave; these are the employer's rejection to grant the right to work part-time while they are on leave, dismissal or a threat of dismissal, disciplinary

sanctions for those who applied for parental leave. Among those who were denied the right to use childcare leave are also fathers who faced further infringement of their labor rights (dismissal, penalties, etc.).

Table 3
Reasons for Denying Working Fathers' Right to Take Childcare Leave and Other Violations of Their Labor Rights

No.	Year of case	Region of Russia where the violation took place	Reason for denying childcare leave	Other violations of rights
1.	2014	Moscow	—	Denied the right to work part-time while on childcare leave
2.		Saint Petersburg	Employer did not specify the reason	—
3.		Astrakhan Region	Employer did not specify the reason	—
4.	2016	Saint Petersburg	Employer did not specify the reason	Further dismissal
5.		Kemerovo Region	Employer did not specify the reason	—
6.		Moscow	Lack of evidence that the father actually took care of the child	Further dismissal
7.	2017	Penza Region	Employer did not specify the reason	Further dismissal
8.		Sverdlovsk Region	Employer did not specify the reason	Further official review of the worker's performance
9.		Stavropol Region	Employer did not specify the reason	—
10.		Moscow	—	Denied the right to work part-time while on childcare leave
11.		Kaluga Region	—	Denied the right to work part-time while on childcare leave; forced dismissal
12.	2018	Moscow Region	Employer did not specify the reason	—
13.		Moscow Region	Did not provide the document from the employment centre proving that the spouse was not receiving the unemployment benefit	—
14.		Tver Region	Employer did not specify the reason	—
15.	2019	Moscow	—	Denied the right to work part-time while on childcare leave

Table 3 Continued

No.	Year of case	Region of Russia where the violation took place	Reason for denying childcare leave	Other violations of rights
16.		Moscow	Lack of blood relationship with the child. Lack of documents proving kinship	—
17.		Moscow		Denied the right to work part-time while on childcare leave
18.	2020	Republic of Buryatia	Different addresses of registration with the child	
19.		Moscow Region	Mother is unemployed	Disciplinary sanction for being absent from work while on childcare leave
20.		Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Region	Employer did not specify the reason	
21.		Chuvash Republic—Chuvashia	Employer did not specify the reason	Further dismissal
22.	2021	Tyumen Region	Childcare is not a man's duty	Threat of dismissal in case of further applications for leave
23.		Voronezh Region	Lack of blood relationship with the child	Further dismissal
24.		Republic of Buryatia	Lack of blood relationship with the child	
25.	2022	Moscow	Mother is unemployed	

On analysing cases of breaching parental leave regulations, we conclude that Russian employers are still sceptical of men taking parental leave. In July 2021, there were made public 4 cases of violating employees' rights. In 2009–2010, lower courts in Saint Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Syktyvkar, and Nizhniy Novgorod received 4 lawsuits from male workers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation who had been denied their right to take childcare leave. Even though these 4 cases occurred in different cities and at different periods, they are almost similar. Men applied for parental leave, and the administration denied their request claiming that men were entitled to parental leave only if children had lost their mother. Lower courts also rejected their lawsuits and took the side of the employer. Only after 12 years, these judgments were appealed against in the European Court of Human Rights, which considered the parental leave refusal an outright discrimination against male workers (Gordeev & Poryvaeva, 2021). The similar case occurred in Saint Petersburg in 2012 when a male worker tried to apply for childcare leave and was subsequently dismissed from his job for unauthorised absence. This time, the court took plaintiff's side, and he was reinstated in his position (Ermakov, 2012).

Discussion

Our results show that generally men do not dismiss the opportunity of taking parental leave themselves. However, according to the Social Insurance Fund of the Russian Federation, in 2019, this right was exercised by 684,000 people, and only 14,000 (approximately 2%) out of them were men. With the opportunity to take parental leave by men being stipulated in the legislation, major reasons for the discrepancy are economic (men, as a rule, have higher wages as compared to women), popular gender stereotypes, a traditional family model, which does not treat an unequal distribution of household responsibilities in Russia as a problem. Additionally, some fear that men risk their professional development (there may also arise another stereotype, and employers may be more favourable to those men who decide to take childcare leave, as this decision may prove their responsible and decent nature and their ability to make a right choice for themselves). Our findings also demonstrate that only half of men are aware of the opportunity to use parental leave when the child is born. Such a low level of awareness can possibly be explained by the fact that some respondents do not have children yet.

Meanwhile, researchers argue that paternity leave is a crucial instrument in the parental leave structure (Bacheron, 2021). In today’s context, when gender stereotypes are gradually becoming a thing of the past and there arises a need for a more even distribution of responsibilities within the family, paternity leave serves as a regulator of family and parental relationships. Paternity leave contributes to a more proactive involvement of men into the child rearing. By taking care of children, men take a part of the parental burden, which is traditionally shouldered on women; they help mothers morally and physically after the childbirth (O’Brien & Wall, 2017; Petts & Knoester, 2018). Researchers claim that paternity leave positively impacts not only women, but also other subjects—fathers themselves, children, and even employers (Table 4).

Table 4
Effects From Paternity Leave Usage

Subjects	Effects
Fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – improving parental competence – having positive influence on men’s emotional well-being
Mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – facilitating adaptation after the childbirth – reducing level of emotional and physical tension – closing the gender gap on the labor market
Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – better physical and emotional health – lesser exposure to depression and mental disorders
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – increasing corporate loyalty – reducing employee turnover and dismissals of workers with children
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – improving intrafamily relations – more even distribution of household responsibilities

Results of our study reveal a discrepancy between the existing parental leave policy in Russia and people's attitude to its state regulation. The study shows that the population needs more flexibility in the parental leave system, including the legislative stipulation of paternity leave as an instrument of the state demographic policy and gender equality policy. The legislation in Russia allows fathers to use childcare leave fully or partially. The increasing number of fathers' complaints about the violation of their rights in recent years proves that more and more working men are willing to take childcare leave. Most often, this is due to the big number of children in the family and a desire to mitigate the mothers' burden. However, employers still take a negative stand on those male workers who decide to apply for parental leave. Most notably, employers very commonly do not specify the reason for rejecting the right for leave. Moreover, our content analysis results demonstrate that some men even face further pressure from the administration, including wrongful dismissals at the employer's initiative. Thus, a desire to take leave (i.e., to exercise a right) may become a reason for the outright discrimination against workers. Apart from that, lower courts often rule in favour of employers, which make employees appeal to higher authorities. We described only some cases of violating employees' rights; there might be even more of them because they are not always made public or challenged in the court. In the last 8 years, only 25 fathers claimed a violation of their rights on the [онлайнинспекция.рф](https://onlineinspekcija.rf) website, which is not so many for such a long period. However, not all workers strive to assert their labor rights. Researchers argue that the level of legal awareness in Russia is low. According to the study conducted by the NAFI Research center and Amulex national legal service, which involved 1,600 people from 52 regions of Russia, the index of Russians' legal awareness in 2019 accounted for 47 percentage points (the maximum value being 100). A total of 22% of those surveyed claimed they had never encountered a violation of their rights (Rossiiane okhotnee otstaivaiut, 2020). Every fourth respondent did not take any action to protect their interests in case of a legal dispute. The major reason for that is the belief that the struggle for rights either results in nothing or even deteriorates the situation. We can only suppose that there are much more cases of denying the father's right to take leave. In Russia, the practice of asserting rights in this sphere is not popular, and if employers issue a denial, the decision is made within the family. Moreover, as potential employers' denials are strongly supported by popular stereotypes, even the process of fathers applying for leave may be to some point regarded abnormal by the family, not even mentioning the protection of the right for leave when denied.

Therefore, we can argue that the only flexibility element of the parental leave system stipulated in the legislation of Russia and some post-Soviet countries does not, in fact, provide any flexibility. In practice, the right for taking parental leave by the father or other relative of the child may be restricted by both the employer and the state. Accordingly, we argue that to address the problem, the attitude of the state and employers to the parental leave system and its regulation should be changed. In doing so, there may be used such instruments as the information policy, which would clarify parents' and other relatives' rights for leave, the image of the conscious and responsible fatherhood promoted in the society, and the integration of the labor market social institute into the state demographic policy.

According to the international experience in this sphere, starting from the late 20th century, there have been growing expectations by different cultures and societies that fathers will be more involved in their children's lives, whereas scientists have been increasingly studying the phenomenon of proactive paternity. There are certain political tendencies related to the phenomenon—Northern European countries pursue the policy of engaging fathers in the family life. Based on the idea of gender equality and family pluralism, the policy in these countries is built on the “use of lose” principle, when parental leave is taken by the mother and the father (Ellingsaeter, 2020; Kvande & Brandth, 2020). Rush (2011) opposes these neoliberal tendencies of de-patriarchisation to neo-patriarchal tendencies in the USA, where, on the contrary, patriarchal family is being protected against social and demographic changes. According to the sociologist, we can suppose that there emerge varieties of worlds of fatherhood policies.

Russia, too, has different models of paternity today. In our country, there are still marked tendencies for the “traditional paternity” (Chikalova, 2014); however, as Russian sociologists argue, recently there has emerged a new type of male parents, the so-called “new fathers”, who not only support the family financially, but also actively involve in childcare, express interest in their needs and the child rearing in general. For “new fathers”, family, children, and family relationship become increasingly valuable in their life (Ildarhanova & Gabdrakhmanova, 2019).

It should be noted that the Russian demographic policy has recently saw serious progress. Apart from increasing the amounts of benefits and new payments, the number of categories of citizens who the state support is targeted at has seriously expanded; it now includes families with children aged 3 to 7 (Ukaz Prezidenta, 2020), single mothers (Postanovlenie Pravitel'stva, 2021), mothers with 10 or more children (Ukaz Prezidenta, 2022). The Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation regularly introduces new initiatives aimed at improving the socio-demographic policy—these initiatives are not only financial, but also organisational. For example, on July 1, 2022, the Chamber held a round table entitled “*Dekretnyi otpusk kak mekhanizm podderzhki rozhdaemosti i rabotaiushchikh roditelei* [Childcare Leave as a Support Mechanism for Birth Rate and Working Parents]”, where experts claimed that the introduction of the flexible childcare leave mechanism would ensure that parents with children under the age of 1.5 years are eligible to choose the period of paid childcare leave while their benefit would be increased or reduced according to the duration of the benefit period as compared to that stipulated in the legislation (V OP RF predlozhili, 2022). Therefore, the initiative suggests that parents will have a choice between longer leave and smaller benefit and shorter leave and bigger benefit.

Another possible measure, which is discussed between demographers, is the modernisation of the childcare leave system by introducing non-transferrable paternity leave (Vinogradova & Poryvaeva, 2022). Both these measures have been available in European countries for a long time; however, in Russia, the question of their regulation has arisen only now, when the demographic crisis has deepened. As our results show, the Russian society is mostly ready for the legal regulation of new measures and for using them in their families.

Conclusion

On the one hand, our study shows that three different stakeholders of the parental leave policy seem to share a generally positive attitude towards fathers using their legally provided right for parental leave. In particular, men in Russia are quite positive about childcare leave—regardless of whether they have children or not, they are aware of the opportunity to take parental leave, and almost half of them are positive about it. Additionally, women are much more aware of the opportunity to take leave by the father than men. A little more than half of women believe that paternity leave should be stipulated in the Russian legislation as an obligation—and not only as an opportunity. More than a third of women claim that their families would use paternity leave. According to survey data compared between men and women, a substantial part of Russian families (both mothers and fathers) would use paternity leave if they could obtain a paternity quota. A small number of complaints against employers made by male workers may also be interpreted as the absence of the social conflict of interest in the parental leave sphere.

On the other hand, in fact, men take only 2% of parental leave in Russia. The content analysis of working fathers' complaints published on the онлайнинспекция.рф website demonstrated that there are instances when fathers do struggle with the infringement of their labor rights—employers often refuse to grant them childcare leave. Most often, employers omit the reason for the denial. Moreover, some workers may face further pressure from the management and be either dismissed or threatened to be dismissed if they request leave. The analysis of cases extracted from the Russian legislation and mass media showed that the existing opportunity for fathers to take childcare leave is thwarted by employers' sanctions or misunderstanding. Thus, there arise an institutional conflict between social institutes of family and labor market. The way this conflict will be addressed will predetermine the possibility to transform the parental leave system in Russia.

To further our research, we intend to reveal the attitude of parents entitled for parental leave to the existing distribution of parental functions during the period of leave, to identify factors of potential inclusion of fathers into the parental leave system, and to evaluate how the existing parental leave system may potentially affect reproductive intentions of the population in Russia.

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