



ARTICLE IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

“Who if Not a Mother?”: Development of Parental Leave Design in Russia

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ABSTRACT

There is an established system of parental leave in Russia. According to the legislation, parental leave can be used not only by the mother, but also by the father or other relative of the child. Nevertheless, men rarely use this right; according to statistics, only 2% of Russian fathers go on parental leave instead of their spouse. The paper seeks to identify the underlying causes of this situation. To study the problem, we conducted a series of in-depth semi-formal interviews with mothers and fathers whose families were eligible for parental leave at the time of the study ($n = 30$). We have identified the perception of this stage of family life by both parents (as a “leave-work” or “leave-vacation”), the reasons for fathers’ refusal to actively engage in the situation, including the likelihood of mothers’ unwillingness to let fathers be involved. The reasons are classified into objective and subjective. Gender stereotypes are revealed from two positions: female and male. The results of the study indicate the need to transform the current system of parental leave in Russia and purposefully work with public opinion in this area.

KEYWORDS

parental leave policy, leave-taker, motherhood, perception of parental leave, transformation of parental leave, parental labor

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Introduction

The regulation of parental leave is attributed an important place in the social policy of many countries. It includes policies on different types of vacations, their duration, the system of parental payments and the possibilities of flexible use of vacations. The main purpose of parental leave is to preserve the workplace and salary for an employee who takes a break from work to devote time to family and children. However, parental leave is much more important than it might seem at first glance. Thus, the parental leave system, being part of family policy, is closely linked to a number of other policies: employment policy, gender equality policy, demographic policy, and policy of benefits.

Although in some countries parental leave can be used not only by the mother, but also by the father of the child, most often, it is women who use this right. Pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent maternity leave exclude women from the professional environment for a long time. Researchers claim that women lose a significant part of their professional skills and competencies during long vacations (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009). Longer parental leave can negatively affect career prospects of parents and their professional adaptation (Valentova, 2019). Moreover, extended parental leave can be detrimental to a woman's career, provoking a decrease in her income in the future (Rossin-Slater, 2017).

An increase in the period of parental leave can lead to stronger gender inequality as parents may be labeled with a certain "specialization" within the family. This specialization encourages mothers to do housework and fathers to increase their working hours (Canaan, 2022). However, the very formation of such a specialization is not related to the duration of leave. Its causes are deeply rooted in those institutional factors and social attitudes that determine the gender contract, namely existing cultural values (Lidbeck & Boström, 2021) and stereotypes regarding the roles of "male breadwinner," "female housewife" (Doucet, 2004; Lomazzi et al., 2018). Researchers argue that traditional load sharing can reinforce the feelings of injustice and role overload, especially among mothers who adhere to more egalitarian attitudes and are focused on building a career (Yavorsky et al., 2015).

Biological differences between men and women can also affect the distribution of parental burden in the family. Due to the child's need for a mother and breastfeeding, it is the woman who is most often with the child in the very first months of their life. Compared to maternal activity, the parental contribution of fathers seems minimal (Schober & Zoch, 2019). For this reason, fathers may feel disconnected from family life (Chalmers & Meyer, 1996). In this context, the involvement of fathers in the upbringing of a child can be considered as a factor of family well-being, suggesting a more even distribution of parental responsibilities between spouses.

To reduce the gender imbalance within the family, some countries introduced paternity leave, which is designed to enhance paternal involvement in the childcare process (O'Brien, 2005). Moreover, such leave contributes to the involvement of fathers in household functions (van Belle, 2016). According to research, paternity leave, as well as the possibility of using parental leave by both parents at the same

time, positively affect the degree of participation of fathers in the child rearing not only directly during leave, but also throughout the child's life (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016). Signs of caring masculinity are increasingly observed among modern fathers as parental values and the practice of active participation in the child rearing are integrated into male identity, without leading to degradation of male status (Brandth & Kvande, 2018). Notably, the parental role of fathers in some countries has recently increased, and men have begun to take a more considerable share of parental and household responsibilities (Johansson, 2011).

In Russia, the number of studies focused on parental leave is not very large. Some of them explore the involvement of fathers and the possibility of spreading paternal leave, but researchers mostly conclude that in Russian society, due to the predominance of traditional patriarchal values, paternal leave is unlikely to become popular (Almazova & Il'inykh, 2015). A gender disbalance in the distribution of household duties during leave, as well as the decreasing well-being of families while they are on leave are some of the reasons why families do not make the new reproductive decisions (Abbasov et al., 2020; Moreva & Sanochkina, 2020).

State regulation of parental leave (including deterrence or promotion of gender equality) plays an important role in creating an environment that determines intra-family interaction (Evertsson, 2016). To overcome the gender imbalance in the domestic sphere, a number of conditions provided by the state are necessary: a developed system of child care services, the infrastructure of children's institutions, social protection of families with children, promotion of equal participation of spouses in the process of raising children (Rocha, 2021). Parental leave policies, including a well-paid leave of moderate duration for mothers, encourage fathers to use leave and mothers to return to the labor market, thus having a positive effect on the division of domestic and parental roles between spouses (Patnaik, 2019).

In Russia, parental leave system includes two types of leaves involving period for pregnancy and childbirth (maternity leave) and childcare leave (parental leave). These leaves are regulated by the Labor Code of the Russian Federation (Trudovoi kodeks, 2001). The duration of maternity leave is 140 days (usually 70 days before childbirth and 70 days after childbirth). The maternity leave benefits amount to 100% of the average wage. Parental leave is granted to a parent or one of the child's relatives until children reach the age of three, but only half of this period is well-paid (40% of the average salary for the last two years). After the child reaches the age of 18 months, the allowance is paid only to low-income families. Most notably, parental leave in Russia can only be used by one person, both parents cannot take it at the same time. However, they can take turns using parental leave, replacing each other an unlimited number of times. While on paternal leave, a parent can work part-time or remotely, which allows continuing professional activities and receiving parental benefits. Apart from the mother and the father, other relatives (grandmother, grandfather) or a guardian who takes care of the child can go on parental leave. Although paternity leave as such is not stipulated in Russian legislation, men have a right to take advantage of parental leave fully or partially. However, this practice is not popular, and only 2% of fathers use parental leave.

The study aims to identify and characterize the models of participation of both parents in the child rearing during parental leave that have developed in Russian society.

Methods

As a source of information, we used semi-formal interviews with parents who had one of the family members on parental leave. A total of 30 respondents from seven regions of Russia were interviewed: Sverdlovsk Oblast, Moscow, Perm Krai, Komi Republic, Chelyabinsk Oblast, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, and Samara Oblast. To recruit respondents, we applied the snowball sampling technique.

The structure of informants by the level of education is as follows: 20 respondents have higher education, seven have secondary vocational education, and three have secondary education. Two informants live without a partner (only with children), two live with their parent, the rest with partners. The interview was attended by parents aged 20 to 42 who have one (24 informants), two (four informants) or three children (two informants). Half of the informants (15) worked in public institutions before parental leave, 12 in private organizations, three did not work (Table 1).

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Informants

Informant No.	Gender	Age	Occupation before leave	Education	Marital status	Number of children	Region
Informant 1	Female	30	Occupational safety and health administrator	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 2	Male	26	Government worker	Higher	Married	1	Moscow
Informant 3	Male	25	Local government worker	Higher	Married	1	Moscow
Informant 4	Female	25	Teacher	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 5	Female	28	Manager	Higher	Married	1	Moscow
Informant 6	Female	24	Teacher	Higher	Married	1	Moscow
Informant 7	Female	25	Manager	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 8	Female	24	Manager	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 9	Female	27	Medicine worker	Secondary vocational	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 10	Female	28	Medicine worker	Secondary vocational	Divorced	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 11	Female	29	Teacher	Secondary vocational	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast

Table 1 Continued

Informant No.	Gender	Age	Occupation before leave	Education	Marital status	Number of children	Region
Informant 12	Female	22	Manager	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 13	Female	22	Medicine worker	Secondary	Married	1	Moscow
Informant 14	Female	29	Medicine worker	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 15	Female	23	Manager	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 16	Female	28	Local government worker	Higher	Married	1	Komi Republic
Informant 17	Female	24	No prior experience	Secondary	Cohabiting	2	Perm Krai
Informant 18	Female	25	Teacher	Higher	Married	1	Komi Republic
Informant 19	Female	26	Store assistant	Secondary vocational	Cohabiting	2	Perm Krai
Informant 20	Female	30	Post office worker	Secondary vocational	Cohabiting	3	Perm Krai
Informant 21	Female	28	Teacher	Higher	Married	1	Chelyabinsk Oblast
Informant 22	Female	20	No prior experience	Secondary vocational	Divorced	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 23	Female	23	No prior experience	Secondary	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 24	Female	42	Sales executive	Higher	Cohabiting	2	Samara Oblast
Informant 25	Female	34	Engineer	Higher	Married	3	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 26	Female	33	Manager	Higher	Married	1	Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug
Informant 27	Female	29	Teacher	Higher	Married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 28	Female	40	HR manager	Higher	Married	2	Sverdlovsk Oblast
Informant 29	Female	31	Teacher	Secondary vocational	Married	3	Chelyabinsk Oblast
Informant 30	Female	30	Teacher	Higher	Not married	1	Sverdlovsk Oblast

The article analyses the detailed answers of informants to questions about their associations with the category of parental leave; with making a family decision on what family member will use the right to leave; with the factors that influenced this decision; and with the difficulties that arise in the family during this period.

Results

According to Russian labor legislation, leave is one of the types of rest time. It is believed that at that time the employee is relieved of their professional duties and spends their free time on rest and recuperation. For this reason, society often equates the word “leave” with “vacation”. The results of the interview indicate that such identification is erroneous in the case of parental leave. Almost all informants categorically stated that maternity leave is far from a vacation. According to parents, raising children during leave is an intensive work that requires a lot of physical, time, and emotional costs:

Well, no, of course **it’s not a vacation**. It’s a break from work, yes. You don’t have to get up for work every morning, go to work. And I would not call maternity leave a vacation. You change the field of activity from one to another. (Informant 20, 10- and 6-year-old sons, 18-month daughter; Trans. by Anna Bagirova, Natalia Blednova, & Aleksandr Neshataev—A. B., N. B., & A. N.)

It’s **still a job**. You teach them [the child] to be an individual, to respect the feelings of others. You need to spend time, explain, convey, inspire. People think it’s a vacation because mom’s not at work. But all the work is at home (changing diapers, sitting, cooking), you do something all day long. (Informant 12, 1.5-month-old daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)

The “leave-work” perception is typical for almost all parents. The informants pointed out the high intensity of work during this period, its routine, constant nature, and a lack of a change between work and rest regimes. However, despite the fact that the informants talked about the complexity of such leave and the enormous workload associated with it, they admitted that they would remember this period as positively colored, with excitement and warmth (Table 2).

Table 2
Parents’ Perception of Parental Leave

Informant	Perception (leave-work/leave-vacation)	Assuming future impressions from leave
2	I really think it’s a type of labor , when you’re working on raising a new person. On our shoulders, spending your health, money, and emotions, we raise, invest in this new person ... This is not a vacation at all, it is a titanic work (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	All the hardships are erased from my mind ... Even now, if you rewind a year ago, our child was 1–2 months old, yes, it was difficult, but now those bright difficult emotions have already gone out, and you remember it more calmly (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
4	This is a different kind of work , not the kind that is at work. Well, here the work is like this ... when all spheres interact. That is, it is both physical, moral, and social. All parties are interconnected and interact with each other. This is a colossal job (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	Well, I probably won’t remember it as a difficult period. This load is all forgotten , somehow reset, and again and again you are full of strength and energy (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)

Table 2 Continued

Informant	Perception (leave-work/leave-vacation)	Assuming future impressions from leave
7	This is not a vacation in any way. A vacation is still something about relaxing. And here there is no rest at all . There is parenting and communication, childcare (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	I will definitely remember this period with warmth (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
9	Well ... up to a year it's probably hard. For up to a year, it seems that you are in hell , you have the same thing every day. I wouldn't say it's a vacation ... well, after a year, it's a vacation (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	There will be all sorts of memories. You don't even seem to remember all this. And you're even ready to give birth to more ... Then you still realize that there are difficulties, you can't escape them, but what happiness it is : a little child running around like that, a copy of you or a copy of your husband (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
11	Of course, this is not a vacation . It's very hard. Well, now, of course, I feel better. Because she's grown up anyway, I already know what she wants (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	No, I will not remember the period of infancy, especially the first six months, as some kind of miracle, some kind of euphoria . Everything that happened after the hospital ... Well, I can't explain it. I felt like I hadn't eaten anything at all. I didn't sleep, I lost fifteen kilos (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
16	Well, this is not a vacation . Well, for example, we go somewhere to the village, it's a rest, a change of scenery. We went to the sea. It's also like a vacation for men (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	I think there will be good memories . The bad is always forgotten, but only the good remains in memory (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
29	I can't say that maternity leave is a permanent vacation. It's the same kind of work, only it goes 24/7 . There is not much rest in maternity leave. It's more about taking care of your child 24/7 so that the child is safe (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	After 1.5 years, you rush to work, and then you think that it would be better to be on leave for up to 3 years to extend this period (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
24	No, it's a break from work, but it's not a vacation like that in the concept of vacation ... To feel like I'm on some kind of huge vacation, there's no such thing (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	You get pleasure from the child. Therefore, their emotions mean a lot. Of course, I think I'll remember it as a good period (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
23	In general, this is not a vacation for me . There are such easy days when you rest ... Nevertheless, you get mentally tired and realize that you are not relaxing completely (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	I think that I will remember it with warmth, with love , with such nostalgia. Like I wish I could go back. I think it will be like this (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
26	Well, I can't say that maternity leave is a vacation. That is, it is unlikely that this has anything to do with rest, rather it is some kind of adaptation to a new period in your life (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)	Even now, we recall many moments that happened before the baby was born and when she was born, the first months, and I think that we will always remember them. With warmth, with love (Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)

Some mothers evaluate the work done on maternity leave as even more challenging compared to professional activities in the labor market. Notably, this position is held by mothers who are focused on their career, satisfied with their work, and plan to return to the labor market before the three-year deadline established by law (or already continue their professional activities while on maternity leave). On the contrary, parents who are not satisfied with their professional sphere tend to consider paid work more difficult, as on maternity leave they take a break from unloved work, tight deadlines, and stress (Table 3).

Table 3
Comparing Professional Labor and Work During Maternity Leave

Category	Codes
Maternity leave is harder than professional labor	<p>I worked at school, it's easier than leave ... Well, I love my job, so to speak. That is, I would return maybe next year (Informant 4, 7-month-old daughter; planning to return to work from maternity leave in 6 months; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>As for me, it's more difficult than work. You fulfill your work responsibilities, come home, and relax. On maternity leave, it's around the clock. I would like to return to work as soon as possible ... I want to go out into the world and earn money (Informant 5, 11-month-old daughter; planning to return to work in 9 months; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>Well, it's much harder here than going to work [smiles]. This is definitely a job. Well, it's just a 24/7 job. This is not a 5-by-2 schedule. It's hard ... You're leaving for another job, only a more difficult one (Informant 6, 1-year-old son; planning to withdraw from leave in a year; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>This is not a vacation at all [laughs]. I think I'm working 24/7 ... My mind doesn't rest at all, after all. It's focused on the child and him not falling, not slipping, not hitting himself. It would be better if I worked not five, but six days. I could work from eight to five, and came home and relax (Informant 10, 2-year-old son; already working; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>This is not a vacation. It's a job. When you rest, you have to rest. It's easier to work, at least there are days off at work. But not on maternity leave (Informant 1, 4-month-old son; already working; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p>
Working on the labor market is harder on leave	<p>I worked there for 15 hours at my job and didn't get much sleep. Similarly, nothing is different here. I even seem to rest more now [laughs] than I did when I was working (Informant 13, 2-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>On maternity leave, I take a break from deadlines, strict rules inherent in work and educational activities. With a child, there is an opportunity to spend time for pleasure, walk, chat, etc. ... A child is like a hobby, it is difficult, but it brings pleasure (Informant 17, 6-year-old daughter, 2-year-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>I'm taking a break from my job, which I didn't want to return to. From contests, work activities. No, this is not a difficult period. I feel comfortable being home, even with a child, but I do my own thing, what I like (Informant 18, 18-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>I'm taking a break from work. Because it is stressful, very psychologically stressful. I enjoy household duties, a child, motherhood, the understanding that this will not happen again in my life, the first steps, the first smiles. I literally take a break from work, I can't get enough of it (Informant 28, 10-year-old and 11-month-old daughters; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>I'm taking a break from work at the moment... The last time I worked in a grocery store called <i>Red and White</i>. And there are a lot of people coming. That is, you have to communicate with them, smile forever, and so on. Should I say that I want to have another baby and will I still give birth? Yes, I don't mind (Informant 19, 7-year-old daughter, 6-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p>

When asked what family member should be on maternity leave, the informants most often answered very unequivocally: each family should decide individually and do what is convenient for both parents. However, when asked why it was decided in their family to give the right to leave to their mother, almost everyone replied that there was not even a choice, since this option is assigned to a woman “by default”: “Well, we didn’t even discuss it. This is **obvious that the mother is on maternity leave**. Well, even if we were discussing this, I would definitely go anyway” (Informant 6, 1-year-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.). “We **didn’t even discuss with my husband** who would go on maternity leave, I just went and that was it” (Informant 27, 9-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.).

We have classified the objective and subjective reasons for a woman taking maternity leave (Table 4). Objective factors include the level of income (as a rule, men’s income is higher, so families make an economically rational choice by sending their mother on maternity leave), physiological characteristics of women (the need to breastfeed a child), the need for the female body to recover after childbirth. Subjective factors include traditional gender stereotypes and attitudes instilled by the family, maternal sense of ownership, mother–child bond. Fathers’ passivity during maternity leave may also be explained by mothers’ distrust of their spouses. Many women believe that they can handle a child better than their husbands. Such an idea is an element of the stereotype about fixed gender roles (a woman is a housekeeper and a man is a breadwinner, whose degree of “masculinity” is determined not by the activity in the domestic sphere, but by success in the labor market). It exists even in the case of parents’ vocalized orientation towards egalitarian values.

Table 4

Reasons for Using the Right to Maternity Leave Mainly by Mothers

Category	Subcategory	Codes
Objective reasons	Men have higher income	It’s just that in our case, Artem [husband] has a higher salary . Therefore, me going on maternity leave was inevitable (Informant 1, 4-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.) This is the financial side because his salary is higher, several times higher than mine (Informant 4, 7-month-old daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.) Well, it’s inconvenient for dad, financially unprofitable to be on leave (Informant 16, 1.7-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
	Breastfeeding	Well, if you breastfeed , then how you will pump (Informant 1, 4-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.) Mom of course! If she’s breastfeeding , then dad won’t be there. We even talked about it with him (Informant 18, 18-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
	Need for recover after giving birth	I also need time to recover after pregnancy and childbirth (Informant 26, 1-year-old daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)

Table 4 Continued

Category	Subcategory	Codes
Subjective reasons	Attitudes originating in the previous generations	<p>This is also a matter of upbringing in our families, so to speak, the concept that a child should be with the mother [thinks]. These are some kind of laid-down family things, the basics (Informant 2, 1.2-year-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>I believe that a man should earn money and provide for his family. Well, that’s because I’ve had such an example since childhood (Informant 20, 10- and 6-year-old sons, 18-month daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.).</p> <p>We didn’t really discuss it, it’s just as if it were a matter of fact ... Well, that is, in my family my mother was on maternity leave, my father was earning money. And I had such an example in front of my eyes, and for me it seemed to be normal (Informant 23, 6-month-old daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p>
	Dominating gender stereotypes that are not subject for discussion	<p>Well, there weren’t even any questions here [laughs], that is, we probably have such conservative views: a man works, a woman takes care of a child (Informant 8, 4-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>Well, because for me the most important thing is for a man to work, to earn money. This is his only duty in this life, in my opinion (Informant 13, 2-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>Somehow it wasn’t even discussed. I don’t know. It seems to me that this is how everyone is assigned. He’s just a man, a breadwinner, and I’m the keeper of the hearth (Informant 19, 7-year-old daughter, 6-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.).</p> <p>Mothers always go on maternity leave, so this issue was not particularly discussed in our family, that dad can go on maternity leave. In our family, the husband earns money, and the mother brings up the children. That’s it (Informant 29, 12-year-old and 6-month-old sons, 4-year-old daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>This is not even discussed in our family. Dad is a real man; he earns money like a breadwinner. Mom is the keeper of the hearth, brings up the children, and he takes part (Informant 28, 10-year-old and 11-month-old daughters; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p>
	Distrust of father	<p>It was important for me to plunge into motherhood, even despite all the difficulties, I do it better than my husband (Informant 5, 11-month-old daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p> <p>I don’t trust him. We have, as it were, an understanding that, as a woman gives birth to a child, she breastfeeds. But I believe that a woman is still a woman, especially at this young age, of course, a woman is more needed (Informant 24, 12-year-old and 8-month-old sons; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)</p>

Category	Subcategory	Codes
Subjective reasons	Maternal sense of belonging	In fact, we didn't even consider another option. That's my baby , period. And I will go on leave (Informant 7, 2-year-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.) You can't give it to anyone . Even if I left him for half an hour at first, I ran home faster. You can't trust anyone with him (Informant 14, 2-year-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)
	Special bond between mother and child	Anyway, mom has some kind of connection with the child . She understands the child more, she knows them better. And the child is still somehow closer to his mother. Well, it's impossible that, it seems to me, the dad went on maternity leave (Informant 11, 1-year-old daughter; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.) In my opinion, the mother is closer to the child anyway. The child is more attracted to the mother and for him the mother ... even a son, even a daughter, for him the mother is the first person (Informant 25, 13- and 2-year-old daughters, 1-year-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.) Mom is still the most important person for a child (Informant 27, 9-month-old son; Trans. by A. B., N. B., & A. N.)

Discussion

A significant part of the informants noted that parental leave is a period requiring significant parental expenses. At the same time, the mothers pointed out that in the future they would treat this period favorably. To the greatest extent, informants focus their attention on the memories about the child. Based on this, we can make a number of assumptions about the reasons for such an ambivalent perception of parental leave by mothers. Firstly, for women, children are an important area of their self-realization in life, and thus, all the problems and difficulties that arise do not acquire any negative character in their eyes, like the positivity of the child's development and maturation process. In other words, the negative emotions associated with the complexity of work during this period are overlaid by positive feelings towards the growing child. Secondly, mothers try to displace and replace their negative experience of being on parental leave by hyperbolizing the positive aspects in this period. Thirdly, they are already on parental leave and begin to model the image of a successful mother in order to meet the social expectations of society in relation to women.

Parents themselves not only consider the care and upbringing of children among their responsibilities, but also identify this activity as a special type of labor, parental labor. The researchers note that in conditions when parental labor during parental leave takes on a negative connotation, it is possible to weaken the motives for the birth of subsequent children (Ilyshev & Bagirova, 2010). This circumstance actualizes the need to provide a favorable environment for the implementation of parental labor both in general and through the transformation of the parental leave system.

For women who are satisfied with their work, it is less difficult to carry out professional activities than parental labor. For this category of women, the question arises about the expediency of parental leave, since it will be easier for them to regain their strength by continuing their professional activities, rather than realizing parental labor. However, the attitude of career-oriented mothers towards the role of parental leave is not uniform. Our results allowed us to identify three different positions of this category of women on the importance of parental leave.

The first one assumes that the family may not use the provided leave at all, the mother can continue to work by hiring a babysitter. In many ways, these mothers, not wanting to do household chores, are more motivated to return to work (Kuhlenkasper & Kauermann, 2010), as they are more interested in the desire to achieve recognition and a higher position in their profession (Strunina, 2022).

The second position does not exempt a woman from the need to combine work and motherhood, even with the involvement of babysitters and relatives. For this group of women, it is important to satisfy their needs for professional self-realization and at the same time leave the dominant role in the upbringing and care of children to themselves, despite the help of other actors of parental labor. By staying on parental leave, having helpers, and at the same time working, these women get away from the potential double burden of combining the roles of a mother and employee, making a forced, but more rational choice in favor of the child.

The third position is based on the importance of the period of parental leave. This category of women, despite their professional ambitions, is unable to step over their role as a mother, which is more important to them though being more intense than the work.

The results we obtained show that during the parental leave period, mothers are the main actors performing household and parental functions. At the same time, mothers try to limit the participation of fathers in parental leave for a number of subjective reasons, such as a possessive attitude towards the child and distrust of the quality of parental functions performed by fathers. However, Lamb and Lewis (2010) did not identify significant differences between the abilities of mothers and fathers to ensure safety and respond to the needs of the child. Since the mother may lose her dominant role in the domestic sphere, she is interested in presenting the situation in such a way that the father is supposedly not as well suited to take care of the child as she is, in order to maintain her status (Rege & Solli, 2013). Olsavsky et al. (2020) emphasize that a more active participation of fathers in the childrearing is possible if mothers are willing to weaken their leading role in the domestic sphere. Some mothers approved of their partner's involvement; however, this caused them emotional distress due to feelings of guilt for lessening their responsibility and delegating their tasks to the father (Kaufman & Almqvist, 2017). Consequently, one of the reasons Russian mothers carry out most of the workload is that they concentrate parental functions in their hands and limit the participation of fathers fearing possible excessive involvement of men in the domestic sphere, which, in turn, will reduce the dominant influence of the mothers themselves. Thus, for many women, the opportunity for self-realization in the family sphere of life will probably be lost, which will force them to seek their application in other spheres of public life, in which they may not be

interested. Consequently, in many ways, women themselves are responsible for the fact that the traditional division of roles is preserved and reproduced in the domestic sphere, when men are assigned the function of a protector and breadwinner, and women are assigned the duties of a housewife.

In this case, the father's use of parental leave contradicts established gender roles. This behavior is likely to be negatively perceived by both women and men. The negative perception of the father's use of parental leave is not due to the direct condemnation from society, but due to fears about the possible convergence of the roles of men and women, which will force them to engage in similar activities and be in tougher competition between representatives of different genders. In addition, the maintenance of familiar roles is facilitated by the fact that, as a rule, men's incomes exceed women's one. Consequently, the time spent by fathers on parental leave is more expensive for the household than by mothers (Becker, 1993). Additionally, after asking questions to two families in which the father is on parental leave (they refused to participate in a full-length interview), we found out that cases of fathers using parental leave have nothing to do with the fact that their incomes are lower than women's ones, but are related to the fact that mothers worked informally before the childbirth, and their form of employment provided an opportunity to continue their professional activities and maintain income, while fathers had the opportunity to continue their career formally part-time, but in fact completely devoting themselves to work. That is, one of the main reasons for fathers not using parental leave is the desire of Russian society, both its male and female parts, to preserve the traditional division of roles in the family.

Conclusion

The results obtained indicate that Russian parents interviewed do not view parental leave as a vacation; rather, it is a period of intensive work associated with the permanent exercise of responsibilities for the care and upbringing of a child. At the same time, they are convinced that in the future, memories of the time spent on parental leave will be positively colored, since leave is associated with the active development of the child and the mothers receiving a unique experience.

During the leave, there is a break from professional activities, which, however, is perceived as forced in one model of modern motherhood. Under this model, the workload during parental leave is considered so significant that the preferred strategy is a quicker return to professional activity rather than continuing to care for the child.

According to the informants, the child's mother should be on parental leave "by default." This attitude is due to traditional family values, where the mother plays the dominant role in the upbringing of children, and fathers, as a rule, are given a secondary role in the process of raising children. We have identified objective and subjective reasons for fathers not using the right to parental leave. Objective reasons are associated with a higher income level for men; the lack of opportunities for men to provide breastfeeding; the need for a woman to recover after childbirth. The subjective reasons included attitudes originating from previous generations; gender stereotypes

that are not subject to discussion in families; distrust of mothers towards fathers; maternal sense of ownership; a special bond between mother and child.

Although the results obtained indicate a social orientation towards the preservation of the existing parental leave system in Russia and the traditional division of gender roles, they allow us to identify a number of contradictions inherent in this system.

Firstly, parental leave is perceived as a difficult period characterized by high labor intensity, routine, and the constant nature of this work, the absence of a change between work and rest regimes, and a high burden on mothers. At the same time, mothers realize that in the future, when recalling this period, it will be positively colored. Creating opportunities to reduce the burden of parental leave by ensuring the availability of childcare services will overcome this contradiction, reducing the negativity of the leave perception and at the very moment of mothers' being on leave.

Secondly, two models of women's perception of parental leave coexist in Russian society today. The maternity leave model, in which the implementation of parental functions on parental leave is identified with more difficult and energy-consuming activities compared to employment in the labor market, competes with another model, which is shared by informants for whom staying on maternity leave provides an opportunity to take a break from professional employment. To reduce the workload of mothers experiencing difficulties on parental leave, it is advisable to start public discussions and develop measures aimed at reducing the working hours of fathers.

Thirdly, a barrier to combining two types of self-realization for women, in family and professional activities, is a lack of necessary conditions for entering the workplace without prejudice to the development of the child. Despite having the right to work part-time, many women are unaware of this or face the fact that the employer allows them to go to work only full-time.

Fourthly, the failure of fathers to use the right to parental leave due to economic considerations (fathers' incomes are higher; thus, the family loses more income when using father's leave) leads to even greater specialization of roles, reproduces and exacerbates the situation of the income gap between men and women. As a result, an effective tool aimed at smoothing income differences between men and women may be to strengthen women's participation in socio-economic activities by creating conditions for the direct involvement of fathers in the exercise of parental responsibilities through the introduction of paternal quotas or increased benefits for fathers.

Fifthly, women believe that they are better at coping with parental responsibilities than men, whereas similar studies indicate that there are no significant differences between representatives of different genders. Paternal schools teaching them parental competencies will help reduce the prejudice of mothers that fathers have fewer parenting skills.

The contradictions identified in the study can be considered as certain risks of the established parental leave system in our country. Their intensification will worsen the situation of many families on parental leave. Reducing these risks can be possible through the inclusion of various tools for the soft transformation of the parental leave system, which may involve measures aimed at alleviating the complexity of work during

the vacation period; developing a range of possibilities for combining professional and parental work and widely promoting their advantages; developing a range of financial proposals for families in which a man enjoys the right to parental leave; overcoming female stereotypes regarding the representation of fathers as parents who “do not know how” to cope with their children.

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