

# **DURATION OF PARENTAL LEAVE IN RUSSIAN PARENTS' ESTIMATES: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE**

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## **Abstract**

Parental leave secures the workplace and wages for an employee who takes a break from work to devote time to family and children. Longer parental leave may have a negative effect on career prospects of parents: it decreases the chances of women to return to the labour market and complicates their professional adaptation. Our research aims to determine the factors that influence the duration of parents' stay on parental leave. We conducted a series of semi-formalized interviews with parents whose families were eligible to use parental leave at the time of the study (n = 30). We obtained the following results: 1) often parents consider it optimal to use parental leave until the child reaches the age of three, but many would like to return to the labour market earlier; 2) dissatisfaction with the amount of parental payments reduces the time spent on parental leave; 3) the attractiveness of work and the availability of kindergartens contributes to an earlier exit from parental leave; 4) partner's participation in domestic and parental functions does not affect the desired duration of parental leave. Our results can be used to improve the existing parental leave system in Russia.

**Key words:** parental leave policy, parental leave, duration of parental leave, design of parental leave

**JEL Code:** J11, J13, J18

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## **Introduction**

Parental leave policy is one of the main elements of family policy. The main purpose of parental leaves is to protect the employment of workers with children during their absence from the labour market. Parental leave secures the workplace and salary for an employee who takes a break from work to devote time to family and children. A parental leave policy implements one of the functions of the welfare state, as it supports the social well-being of a population group that cannot fully realise their professional opportunities during a certain period of time. Despite similar goals, parental leave policies can vary significantly between countries in terms of

flexibility (i.e., opportunities providing balanced parents' professional and domestic responsibilities), payment system, and duration of leave.

The parental leave system in Russia follows principles established during the Soviet period. According to Russian legislation, there are two types of parental leave: maternity leave (70 days before childbirth and 70 days after; payment is 100% of the average salary) and parental leave, which can be taken by one of the parents or another relative until the child reaches the age of three. The payment system for parental leave in Russia has two parts. The first part is well-paid and lasts until the child is 18 months old. During this time, parents receive 40% of their average income from the past two years. The second part of the payment system applies when the child is between 18 months and 3 years old. It is only given to families with low incomes or may not be paid at all.

## **1 Literature review**

The duration of parental leave is a widely discussed topic among policymakers and researchers analysing the effects of parental leave on both parents and children.

For instance, when assessing the impact of parental leave on the health of family members, researchers argue that longer parental leave negatively affects mother's health, leading to increased medical expenses (Chuard, 2023) but reduces infant mortality rates and illnesses among children (Van Niel et al., 2020).

Taking a long break from work for parental leave may have several negative consequences for leave-takers, such as losing their professional and personal skills. As a result, women who return to work after having a child may face difficulties, for example, lower income, which is often referred to as "motherhood penalties" (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Rossin-Slater, 2017).

A longer parental leave can negatively affect parents' career prospects. Studies show that women who take paid leave for over a year have lower chances of returning to work and face difficulties in professional adaptation (Valentova, 2019). Additionally, mothers on extended leave may have less motivation to advance in their careers, prioritising their domestic and parenting roles instead (Lundborg, Plug, & Rasmussen, 2017). In contrast, a shorter parental leave has minimal impact on women's employment, professional aspirations, and income levels upon their return to work (Joseph et al., 2013).

A longer parental leave can lead to a stronger gender imbalance within the family. Mothers tend to take on more household tasks, while fathers often increase their professional workload. This reinforces the division of family responsibilities (Canaan, 2022).

Our research aims to identify the factors that influence the duration of parental leave taken by parents in Russia. We specifically investigate the impact of government regulations on the organisation of family dynamics.

## **2 Data and methods**

We interviewed 30 parents from 7 regions of Russia who were eligible to take parental leave at the time of the study. The participants aged 20 to 42 had one (24 participants), two (4 participants), or three children (2 participants). We used the "snowball sampling" method to recruit respondents.

The interview explored attitudes towards the legally set maximum duration of parental leave, desired length of time spent in parental leave, and factors that influence an earlier return from parental leave.

## **3 Results**

1. Many leave-takers view the established three-year duration of parental leave positively. According to parents, the length of leave should primarily depend on the child's needs. By the age of three, children become more independent, handle separation from parents better, and adapt easier to the kindergarten. To note, this perspective is more common among parents who do not plan to return to the workforce before their child reaches a certain age — from 18 months to 2 years.

*I believe that this is the perfect time. Some children start going to the kindergarten at 18 months, while others start closer to 3 years old. So, this timeframe is probably chosen for a reason (Natalya, 25 years old; an 18-month-old son).*

*From a psychological perspective, the child's development is crucial until the age of three. That's why three years is the right duration for parental leave. It's important to invest maximum time and effort in the child's development before they start to separate from their mother. They become more independent and self-reliant (Tatiana, 24 years old; a 1-year-old son).*

*I believe that three years is the most optimal option because by that age, the child's more adapted to the world and can handle being in the kindergarten without their parents (Yana, 27 years old; an 18-month-old son).*

2. Parents who consider the three-year duration of parental leave to be too long are usually career-oriented; they want to return to work within a year or even earlier after their child's birth. They see the three-year break as a missed opportunity for professional and creative development.

*Three years is indeed a long time, and it can significantly impact a woman's place in society. I have already applied for the kindergarten to send my child there at one year old. In fact, I need to return to work in November [when my child will be 6 months old], at least for two hours (Maria, 30 years old; a 4-month-old son).*

*It's too much. Can you imagine someone being with their child for three years? What will happen to them? I think it's easy to go crazy when you're with your child 24/7. I returned to the office just six days after giving birth (Sofia, 22 years old; an 18-month-old daughter).*

*It's a lot. I wanted to return to work after one year. When my child turned one, I felt like I had a screw loose, I wanted to climb the walls... it was just the same thing over and over again. I cried all the time, "Take me back to work!" (Ekaterina, 25 years old; a 2-year-old son).*

3. Despite many parents considering a three-year duration of parental leave to be optimal, not all leave-takers are willing to stay on leave until the end of this period. The main factors influencing parents' decision to return to work earlier are related to the way parental leave is regulated in Russia. These factors include low parental benefits and payments for only half of the leave period, limited number of places in kindergartens, high competition in the job market. Additionally, some parents may choose to return to work earlier due to the appeal of their job and a desire for personal fulfilment (Table 1).

4. We have identified a model for equal involvement of fathers in parenting functions.

*We do not support the idea that the father just helps to raise the child. Dad is not mom's helper. This child is just as much mine as hers. When our son was born, I decided that it was important for me to learn to do everything that my wife would do (Evgeny, 26 years old; a 1-year-old son).*

**Table 1: Factors influencing early return to work before the three-year period**

Category of factors	Factor	Code
Institutional level	Parental benefit amount during leave	<i>In our country, you can take parental leave for up to 3 years, but the catch is that you only get benefits for the first 18 months. After that, you're left with a tough choice — either go back to work or struggle without any income. (Elizaveta, 29 years old; a 9-month-old son)</i>
		<i>Not many people can afford to stay at home for three years. Everyone needs to earn a living. The government support we receive is quite limited, it barely covers the cost of diapers. But we still need to feed and clothe our child. It's challenging. (Ivan, 25 years old; a 1-month-old daughter)</i>  <i>I don't want my child to spend a year in the kindergarten until they're three while I just sit at home. If I can, I want to get back to work as soon as possible. Money is a big factor in this decision. (Anastasia, 28 years old; an 11-month-old daughter)</i>
	Available places in kindergartens	<i>I will definitely stay at home until my child turns two. When they reach the age of two, I hope that we will be given a place in the kindergarten. Then we will wait and see (Tatiana, 24 years old; a 1-year-old son)</i>  <i>Well, we actually have an opportunity to enrol our child in the kindergarten starting from 18 months of age. Before that, no one accepts them... So, it's somewhere around a year and three months, a year and five months. (Ekaterina, 25 years old; a 2-year-old son)</i>
	Labour market challenges	<i>They told me that if I don't return within a year and a half, my position won't be secured... and I'll have to look for another job. (Yana, 27 years old; an 18-month-old son).</i>  <i>They offered me this position when I found out I was pregnant. I realised that I would have to put my entire career that I had worked so hard for on hold. But I didn't want to miss out on this opportunity, so I'm holding onto this position now. (Maria, 30 years old; a 4-month-old son)</i>
Personal and family level	Appealing job and desire for personal fulfilment	<i>Well, I actually enjoy my job, so to speak. I mean, I would be willing to return next year, maybe (Nadezhda, 25 years old; a 7-month-old daughter).</i>  <i>I'm just that kind of person, you know. I can't sit still, I'm always doing something. I have a husband here, I have a job, and I used to teach English and German to children (Sofia, 22 years old; an 18-month-old daughter).</i>  <i>I don't know... If there was some really cool job opportunity, I might consider returning from my parental leave earlier than planned (Anna, 28 years old; an 18-month-old son).</i>

Source: results of the authors' research

Based on fathers' involvement in household and parenting functions, the participants were divided into two opposing groups: those with involved fathers and those with uninvolved fathers. However, the level of father's support does not impact women's decision to shorten or extend their parental leave.

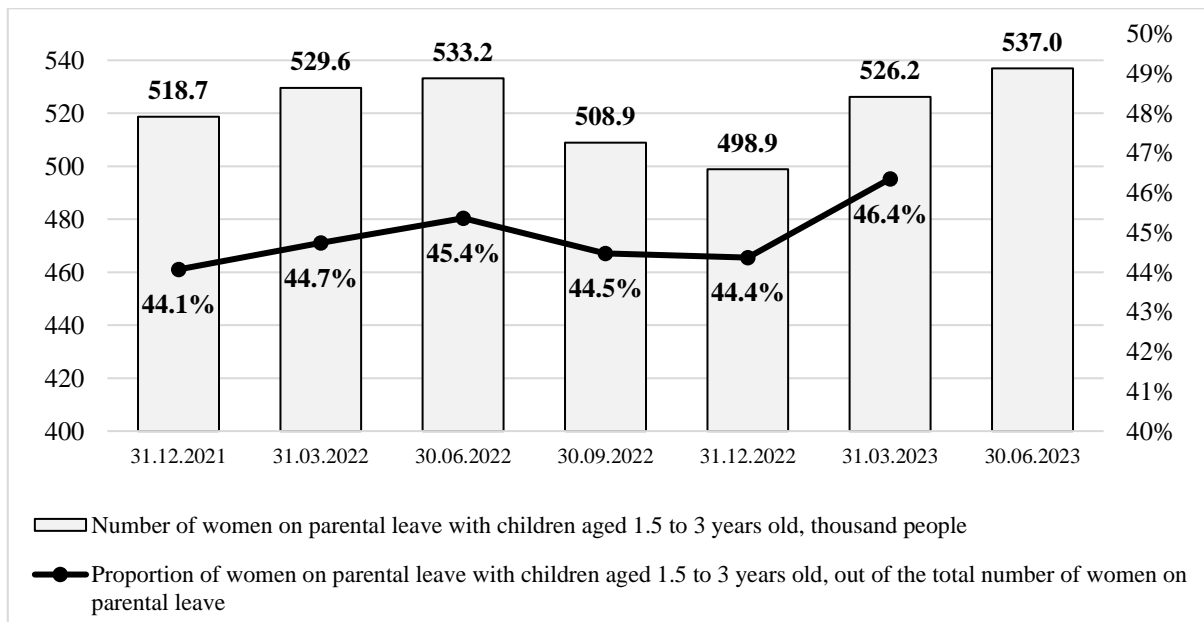
## 4 Discussion

The study results suggest that government policies regarding the duration of parental leave align with the preferences of parents themselves. Many participants appreciate the opportunity to use parental leave until their child turns 3 years old.

However, even not career-oriented parents are not willing to stay on parental leave until the end of the three-year period. The main reason is the financial strain on the family after the child's birth. In other words, the current system, while appearing optimal, is not fully utilised by Russian families.

In early 2023, the Russian government implemented a reform of the parental benefits system. Starting this year, low-income families (with an average income per family member not exceeding 14,375 roubles or €140 nationwide) can receive a benefit for any child between the ages of 1.5 and 3. Previously, this benefit was only available for the first and second child. These changes have had a significant impact on the number of parents staying on parental leave until the child turns three. According to the Federal State Statistics Service, in the first quarter of 2023, the proportion of women on parental leave with children aged 1.5 to 3 years old increased by 2%, while the seasonal increase usually does not exceed 0.7% (Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1: Change in the number of women on parental leave with children aged 1.5 to 3 years old**



Source: Federal State Statistics Service: <https://fedstat.ru/indicator/59531>

However, most parents do not meet the minimum income criteria and are not eligible for this benefit; therefore, they are forced to consider returning to the labour market after their child turns 1.5 years old. For such parents, the desired duration of leave corresponds to a well-paid portion of it.

Moreover, an earlier return to work can be driven not only by the termination of benefit payments after 1.5 years since the child's birth but also by the insufficient amount of these payments. In fact, when one parent goes on parental leave, the family is left with only one breadwinner, making it difficult to meet the needs of the entire family (Pishnyak & Nadezhkina, 2020).

Another factor affecting the duration of parental leave is the availability of municipal preschool institutions. Parents whose children have obtained a place in the kindergarten at an earlier age can return to the workforce and continue their professional activity. According to Russian legislation, children can be enrolled in the kindergarten from the age of two months and older. However, the number of available places is limited, and parents often face long lines to secure a place in the kindergarten.

Attitudes towards work and the desire for professional fulfilment also impact the length of parental leave. Career-oriented parents, satisfied with their profession, seek career advancement and view parental leave as a missed opportunity, therefore striving to return to work as soon as possible. In contrast, employees who are dissatisfied with their job perceive parental leave as a way to escape mentally exhausting work. Often, such parents end up wanting to change their professional field in the future (Sanochkina, 2019).

Our research showed that the husband's involvement in child-rearing does not affect the duration of the mother's parental leave. Previous studies in other countries showed contrasting results, suggesting that active father involvement can contribute to mothers returning to the labour market (Frodermann, Wrohlich & Zucco, 2023). We believe this difference may be due to paternal quotas in some countries, which require fathers to take on parental responsibilities. However, Russia does not have such a policy.

## **Conclusion**

Our study found that people's views on the ideal length of parental leave align with its legal duration. However, the current system, although deemed optimal, is not fully utilised by Russian families. We believe that the organisation of leave is influenced by institutional factors such as state financial support and access to childcare facilities. These factors impact individual

decisions on leave duration. Regulating these factors could facilitate earlier return to the labour market for working parents. However, these parents are in the minority. The results show a gap between the institutional and family levels of organising parental leave in Russia, and bridging this gap could improve demographic and family policies.

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