

Parental leave policies best promote gender equity and well-being in women's health

January 15 2014

Government policies that allow both parents to take time off after a child is born provide positive benefits for the physical and mental health of women, according to a literature review that looked at the influence of public policies on women's overall health.

The findings were published today in the journal *Epidemiologic Reviews*.

Parental leave policies tended to reduce the physical and mental stress levels in women who, historically, held the majority of the burden childcare and household responsibilities, said Dr. Patricia O'Campo, director of the Centre for Research on Inner City Health of St. Michael's Hospital.

"By having [government policies](#) implemented that require both parents to share [parental leave](#), responsibilities like household and childcare duties tended to be more equally distributed between parents," said Dr. O'Campo, a social epidemiologist. "This support had a positive impact on women's [health](#) in particular."

According to the literature review, while most countries have some sort of parental leave policy, countries differ in length the length of this leave and often both parents are not allowed to take the time off after the birth of a child.

"Parental leave allows both parents to spend that quality time with their child without having to worry about who will pay the bills and whether

each parent had a job to return to," said Dr. O'Campo.

Researchers noted that some limitations existed when reviewing the effect of parental leave policies. This included the inability to find studies that analyzed the impact of parental leave on same-sex couples.

Dr. O'Campo said that it was important to implement government policies that enforce the promotion of equality between men and women in society because they tend to support women's overall well-being and health. An example of such a policy would be one that promotes women to enter politics.

"When women are presented in the parliament or city councils, there's evidence to suggest that women's issues are promoted," said Dr. O'Campo. "The issue of violence against women, for instance, gets more support and there is affirmative action and policies put in place."

According to researchers, women tend to suffer more than men from a host of non-fatal, disabling physical and mental illnesses and are generally expected to live few years in good health, despite having a higher life expectancy.

"Government policies should actually be good for everybody, not just women," said Dr. O'Campo.

Overall, the literature review also found that future research is needed to capture the full effect of public policies on both [women](#)'s and men's health and that "we cannot fix social problems without thinking about individual behaviours and risk factors."

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

Citation: Parental leave policies best promote gender equity and well-being in women's health (2014, January 15) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-01-parental-policies-gender-equity-well-being.html>

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