

Experiences of Family, Care, and Parental Leave in the Federal Public Service

Survey Report



Report Outline

1. Project Objectives

3

- to increase understanding of family care in the federal public service
- to foster public service workplaces that are inclusive and friendly to employees with family and care work responsibilities

2. Demographic Highlights

4

- total survey respondents: 2615
- gender identity
- member of an equity seeking group
- highest level of formal education
- region
- group
- leave status

3. Survey Findings

6

- family, caregiving and career
- support from management
- information and understanding of leave entitlements and policies

4. Future Recommendations

16

- training program

Introduction and survey objectives

PIPSC Women in Science (WiS) is an initiative of the Science Advisory Committee that works towards addressing the challenges faced by women (cis and trans) scientists in the Canadian federal public sector.

The project is working towards advancing policy around:

- care work
- maternity leave
- parental leave
- family leave

The WiS project team developed a survey to learn about the real-world experiences of maternity, parental and family leave in the federal public sector. The survey was circulated to PIPSC members in September 2020 and the data was collected over two weeks.

The main objectives of the survey were to:

- increase understanding of family care in the federal public service
- foster public service workplaces that are inclusive and friendly to employees with family and care work responsibilities

Here you will find the major findings from the survey, and recommendations on how to improve and better implement policies around parental, maternity and caregiving in the federal public sector. This is all with the aim of making our workplaces more inclusive and welcoming to people with caregiving responsibilities.



After reviewing the collective agreements of different PIPSC groups, the WiS project team developed infographics depicting the general maternity, parental and family care leave entitlements and return to work rights that are available to federal public sector workers.

Survey findings

The survey included both multiple choice and open-ended questions. It was available in both English and French.

Demographic highlights



2615

The survey had a total of 2615 respondents.



Gender: A vast majority of the respondents identified as women (69%). Twenty-nine percent identified as men. Just over 1% of respondents preferred not to mention their gender and less than 1% preferred to self-identify with a gender other than woman, man, Two-Spirit, or non-binary.



Member of an equity-seeking group: Twelve percent of the respondents were racialized people. Four percent were people living with a disability. Seven percent of the respondents were allophone (where their first language was neither English nor French). Three percent of the respondents belonged to LGBTQ+ communities. Less than 1% identified as Indigenous people.



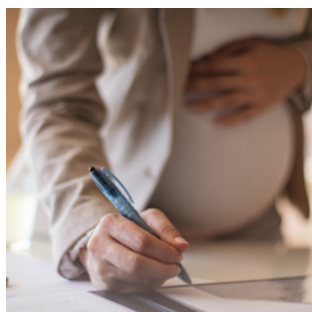
Education: Most of the respondents had a Bachelor's degree (41%), 35% had a Master's degree, and 16% had a PhD.



Region: Majority of the respondents (41%) were based in the National Capital region. Fifteen percent were based in Quebec, 14% were based in Ontario, 11% were based in the Prairie/Northwest Territories region. Ten percent were based in the Atlantic. Nine percent were based in the British Columbia/Yukon region. Less than 1% were based in Nunavut.



Group: A vast majority of the respondents (42%) belonged to the Applied Science and Patent Examination (SP) group. Twenty percent were in the Audit, Commerce and Purchasing (AV) group, 14% were in the Architecture, Engineering and Land Survey (NR) group, 13% were in the Health Services (SH) group, and 11% were in the Research (RE) group.



Leave Status: Forty-two percent of the respondents have taken maternity or parental leave, and 30% anticipate taking it during their career in the public service. Five percent of the respondents were on maternity or parental leave during the time of the survey. Ten percent of the respondents have taken domestic violence leave, long-term disability leave or caregiver leave.



Parenting and Caregiving Status: Eighty-two percent of the respondents said that they are currently a parent or plan to be a parent while working in the federal public service. Fifty-eight percent said that they are a part of a two or more parent family. Four percent are primary caregivers, 4% are sole parents and 6% do shared parenting.



Since March 2020, 29% of the respondents have had to use Leave Code 699 to accommodate child care and/or family responsibilities.

Family, caregiving and career

Our survey found that family, caregiving and/or parenting status have a significant impact on a worker's career as well as their career aspirations. Overall, 48% of the respondents expressed concern over the impact of family care responsibilities on their career.

"I have chosen not to have children as I don't feel that I would be able to meet my position requirements if I had a child."



41% of the survey respondents said they believe that maternity and parental leave can negatively affect career trajectory.



34% of the respondents have considered delaying having a child because they believe it will negatively impact their career.

"I do not think, given my current field and context, that I would be able to successfully balance the expectations of me as a researcher and the family care I would need to provide considering my partner's situation, and therefore I have elected not to have children in the foreseeable future."



58% of the respondents believe that women and gender minorities in particular are disproportionately impacted by family care responsibilities.



24% of the respondents have declined a career development opportunity because of their parental responsibilities.



22% of the respondents who are researchers said that their funding was impacted by their maternity or parental leave.

Insufficient Sick Leave Credits

Twenty-seven percent of the respondents who needed to take leave during pregnancy said they did not have enough sick leave. Workers have been forced to take several measures as a result of insufficient sick leave credits. Fifty-one percent of workers said they went to work despite being sick. Twenty-six percent worked remotely. Twenty-six percent took the day off, and made up their hours at a later date by working overtime. Fifty-one percent took another form of paid leave.

“I had to take six weeks of sick leave during my second pregnancy. I was fortunate enough to have enough sick leave days accumulated but if I was new to the public service and/or didn’t have enough credits accumulated then I would have never been able to take the six weeks off.”

Some respondents said they went on maternity leave early and went back to work early, as a result of insufficient sick leave credits during pregnancy. Some claimed to have used advanced sick leave credits.

“I feel penalized because of maternity leave because I have not, according to management, ‘put in the 5 years’ to accumulate experience.”

Several respondents shared that they faced pressure to stay current in their field during parental leave. The survey findings show that there is an expectation placed on employees to continue writing papers and respond to edits when on leave.

Some respondents also put pressure on themselves due to the fear of being left behind. Some shared that they felt responsible to keep in loose contact with their colleagues.



“I was in a specialist role so not everyone was able to do my workload. I wanted to help and support if they needed advice.”



“Many job advertisements ask for ‘recent experience’. During maternity and parental leave, your experience becomes less recent, putting you at a disadvantage in the job competitions.”

Parents with caregiving responsibilities towards adult children expressed that they particularly felt unsupported.

Declined career opportunities due to caregiving responsibilities

The survey findings indicate that workers with caregiving responsibilities often had to turn down opportunities for career development. This was particularly a challenge for single parents. Workers with children and family obligations were often unable to travel for work, and had to turn down new positions and job opportunities that required travel, relocation, or a time commitment that was incompatible with their childcare and family-care roles.

“I acted in a manager role for 4 years. I declined to take the position permanently because of the lack of flexibility to balance family responsibilities with work during COVID-19. Managers were not given the option to use leave code 699. I had to work long hours, and more than 5 days per week, to deal with various requests, while having two kids under 4 at home with me full time, for 20 weeks. This was not sustainable.”

Some respondents expressed that not having provisions for remote work particularly made it hard for them to manage work-related travel or relocation and caregiving.

“While on maternity leave, I was offered a position, however I would have to start when my child was two months old. Therefore, the research position was given to the next candidate.”

Incurring expenses to balance caregiving and work responsibilities

Our survey found that balancing caregiving and work responsibilities is often expensive for workers. They regularly incur expenses like overnight child care while travelling for work, after-school care, extra hours of child care during overtime and additional travel expenses for family members to take care of the child during work-related travel (e.g. paying for the child's grandparents' flights so that the child can be left in their care while the employee travelled for work). Out of the participants that needed childcare support, 4% said they had access to childcare fund entitlements while travelling for work.



Only 2% of the respondents that needed support said they had childcare provisions at work.



11% of the respondents that needed caregiving support said they had the provision for overtime compensation or ability to refuse overtime if they have parental responsibilities.

“I have had to bring my child with me to Ottawa for meetings and I didn't qualify for caregiving support while there given that I am not a single parent. My husband had work commitments and the child could not be kept home at the time.”

Support from management

The survey found that many employees receive some form of support from their management in navigating family, parental and caregiving responsibilities. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents said that they were able to arrange modified work hours with their management to meet childcare needs. Thirty-nine percent also said that they had a provision for remote work. Some respondents were also able to negotiate modified work duties to accommodate disability or have modified work arrangements during pregnancy.

Flexible working arrangements, provision to work from home and Code 699 are some of the common areas where respondents have felt supported by their department. Workers have felt particularly supported in terms of remote work and flexible working hours since the pandemic.

However, several survey respondents shared that they have received inadequate support (11%), or no support at all (13%), from their management in regard to parenting or family caregiving.

Fourteen percent of respondents who have taken maternity, parental or caregiving leave encountered issues communicating their leave to their manager. Managers often lacked knowledge and understanding about leave entitlement and policies. Some respondents said that they also had difficulty obtaining coherent or clear information from their HR department.

Many respondents said that they did not feel comfortable communicating with their manager about their leave plan.

Some respondents were worried about losing their job because of their leave and some were worried about how they would be perceived by their manager or co-workers. Some respondents said that they delayed telling their manager about their pregnancy. Of the respondents who have taken maternity, caregiving or parental leave, 38% said that they did not discuss any formal or informal plan with their manager in advance of their leave.

Moreover, several respondents claimed to have received unsolicited (and often impolite) advice from managers on how to plan their family or pregnancy.

Leave entitlements and policies

The majority of the respondents believe that leave entitlements are inadequate for parents and caregivers. Only 45% of the respondents believe that the parental leave entitlements in their group's collective agreement provide adequate support for families and new parents.

The survey data found that accessing leave entitlements or information has been a challenge for many employees. The process or instructions are often unclear, and many employees were not sure who to contact or where to access the information. Eighteen percent of the survey respondents have had issues accessing their leave entitlements due to lack of information, lack of guidance or delayed payment. Nineteen percent of the respondents have had difficulties accessing information on maternity, parental and/or caregiving leave in their department.

Several respondents said that there was no system in place for accessing information about leave entitlements and employees had to rely on word-of-mouth or past experiences of themselves or a co-worker.

“Applying for leave is never straightforward. HR does not help, so we just find the most recent person who took leave, and follow their process. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t.”

Many respondents shared that their HR was inaccessible, unresponsive and sometimes provided misinformation.

“I feel like there is no one to call to ask for help. I am not sure where to start, besides talking to my manager. I have received very little information from my employer.”

As previously mentioned in the report, many respondents shared that they received inadequate support from their manager.

“My manager refuses to authorize family leave for kids’ appointments.”

Managers also often lacked information and were unable to support the employees.

“My manager denied my family-related leave in advance of maternity leave, because they decided that the birth leave meant I had to be in active labour.”

“While my manager is personally very supportive, there is no clear guidance at what we are entitled to.”

Only 57% of the respondents believe that their department’s policies are friendly and considerate of workers with parental and caregiving responsibilities.

Courses and training programs

Fifty-seven percent of the survey respondents are interested in participating on a course or training related to family care, maternity and parental leave in the public service. The following are some of the resources and information that respondents would like to see in the course:

- estate planning (72%)
- wills (76%)
- provincially specific childcare options (47%)
- financial planning (76%)

Additionally, survey respondents suggested the following resources and improvements to enhance employees' understanding of maternity, parental, and/or caregiving leave policies and their implications:

- a central resource portal or website to access all information on parental leave and available benefits
- a guide or summary in clear and accessible language
- a dedicated parental leave advisor or clear assignation of this responsibility to a HR personnel
- training, courses and information sessions
- infographics and videos
- training for managers and the HR department
- troubleshooting problems with the Phoenix pay system

The survey respondents also expressed interest in seeing information related to family care, maternity and parental leave in the public service, in the following areas:

- care of parents/older family members
- pensions and retirement planning
- sick leave benefits
- mental health support
- fertility options

Future recommendations

Recommendations from survey respondents to make public service workplaces more inclusive and welcoming to workers with parenting and caregiving responsibilities:

1. Flexible working arrangements

Flexible working hours, compressed work weeks and provision to work from home could help employees with parenting and caregiving responsibilities. This could allow workers to balance work with family responsibilities and work during hours that best suit them.

2. Allocation of resources and funding towards making workplaces more accessible for all

Provision of daycare facilities at work, creation of temporary staff positions to help departments with the workload when one or more employees are on parental or caregiving leave, and more funding towards mental health - would all contribute to a more accessible workplace.

“More funding to staff positions when a parent is on leave instead of leaving the work undone or relying on coworkers to pick up the slack.”

3. Increase in leave days

More family leave days and increase in sick leave credits. An increase in family leave days and sick credits would help members caring for children with complex needs as well as aging parents.

4. Changing the workplace culture

Greater acceptance of taking parental and caregiving leave, encouraging fathers to take parental leave along with more acceptance and inclusion of employees with caregiving responsibilities towards adult family members.

“Right now, there are too many traditionalists that don’t accept or respect mothers in science. This needs to change.”

5. Better access to information

Better access to information, more guidance on return to work and educating managers and HR staff on leave entitlements and policies will help employees navigate the leave and return to work processes.

6. More support from the employer

More support from management and HR in helping employees navigate work-life balance and better support during the pandemic will work towards creating a positive culture around care.

“I am a little concerned about productivity during the pandemic. With 3 young children it was difficult to work. I am worried that if a workforce adjustment situation were to arise that I may be at a disadvantage since I have been less visible in my department over the last six months.”

Next steps from the WiS Team

The findings of the survey make clear that important policy changes are urgently needed to accommodate the needs of employees with parenting and caregiving responsibilities. In addition to the recommendations made by the survey participants, the WiS team proposes the following steps:

- **Help build a culture that values care:** Building a culture that values care means ongoing campaigning and advocacy work around sick leave, parental leave, abuse of authority in leave approvals, leave code 699 and work-life balance. A positive care culture looks like acceptance and inclusion for parents and caregivers at work and honours a diversity of caregiving experiences and responsibilities.
- **Develop clear educational tools for employees and managers:** Employees need more than word-of-mouth information when making decisions about parental and caregiving leave. These decisions directly impact their families and their careers. We propose that courses be offered to employees, managers and HR personnel so that they can provide adequate support and advice to employees about leave and entitlement. All costs related to these courses (including time costs) must be covered by the employer and the courses must be easily accessible.

What is PIPSC doing...

Knowing that care leave is an important priority for our members, PIPSC has built a campaign on this issue. The first step is education and awareness. Accordingly, webinars will be given that highlight all the leave options in our collective agreements, in addition to the process for requesting leave, and what to do if denied. Secondly, we will build evidence for collective bargaining. Beginning with the work from the WiS group, PIPSC will expand its research to the whole membership, and will then work with our negotiators to build evidence-based proposals to effectively support and advocate for these issues.