



“Families and Work – A Chance for Change”

25 September 2014

Balancing work and family life is an on-going struggle, especially for the many families who cannot afford to take unpaid leave. Following hard-won campaigns, progress has been made in Ireland in the last 15 years in extending Maternity Benefit to 26 weeks. But once a child is 6 months old, parents in Ireland have little or no support.

Families come in many shapes and sizes, and families vary greatly in the choices they might like to make about the care of their young children. In practice, however, most families have little choice.

The duration of paid Maternity Leave pushes most mothers back to work when a child is 6 months old. Most mothers then face a stark choice between staying in the workforce or working full time at home. Unpaid leave is unaffordable to most. Most fathers have no entitlement to paternity leave at all. And without legislative backing, many businesses cannot afford to introduce work-life balance measures.

Currently, women do the majority of care work which has a huge impact on women's economic independence, with 50% of women earning less than €20,000 a year.

A chance for change

The Government has committed to publishing a Family Leave Bill this autumn. The Bill offers a real chance for change in how Government policies can help families to balance work and family life.

Stronger legislative supports would bring benefits all round:

- **Children.** For very young children, especially children under 12 months old, the consistent and loving care and attention of parents is of lasting importance. Stronger family leave policies would also reduce stress levels in the home and allow parents to have more time and energy to give to their children's care and nurture. Paid Leave for Parents would allow children to stay at home with a parent for longer.
- **Parents.** Paid Leave for Parents would make it easier for parents to remain in work while fulfilling their care roles in the home. Paid leave would make an especially big difference to the many families with young children who are struggling financially. Both paternity leave and parental leave would enable fathers to do more of the caring.
- **Businesses.** The success of a business depends above all on its staff. Enabling employees to combine work and family life without stress can improve productivity and staff loyalty. Employers might like to offer more support to families, but fear a loss of competitiveness. Legislative backing would level the playing field, enabling all businesses to support their employees – and improve productivity.

Current policy in Ireland

While the duration of Maternity Benefit has improved considerably, when Ireland's family leave policies are considered as a whole, they offer little support to families with young children and compare poorly to other European countries.

- As the only **paid** leave is **Maternity Benefit**, a large proportion of mothers in Ireland return to work when the paid leave ends, when their child is 6 months – much sooner than the 12 months recommended by UNICEF
- Mothers are only entitled to take **breaks at work to breastfeed** until a child is 6 months old, which is of no value when Maternity Leave lasts 6 months.
- There is **no legal entitlement to paternity leave** in Ireland.
- **Parental leave is unpaid**, making it unaffordable for most families.
- Since 2013 there has been a limited **right to request flexible work**, but it is so constrained as to be meaningless for most employees.

Aims of the seminar

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the National Women's Council of Ireland and Start Strong have come together to organise this policy seminar on 25th September, to open up public debate on what the Government should include in the Family Leave Bill.

Our three organisations draw together three central perspectives in designing policy on family leave: women, children, and workers. By working together on the issue, we hope to show how well-designed leave policy can achieve multiple ends.

The keynote speaker will be Professor Peter Moss, chair of the *International Network on Leave Policies and Research*, who will put current Irish provision in international context.

The seminar will be addressed by the Minister for Justice and Equality. Concluding remarks will be made by the Minister of State for New Communities, Culture and Equality.

Family Leave Bill

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the National Women's Council of Ireland and Start Strong believe the Bill is a crucial opportunity to give families stronger supports through:

1. Introducing a new entitlement to **Paid Leave for Parents**, to be taken at the end of Maternity Leave, and available to either parent. The duration could be increased incrementally, with the aim of achieving **at least 12 months' total paid leave**.
2. Promoting the sharing of care roles through reserving at least 1 month of the new Paid Leave for Parents for fathers as a **"father's quota"**.
3. Introducing 2 weeks' paid **Paternity Leave**, available to a partner at the time of the birth of a child, to be taken concurrently with Maternity Leave.
4. Extending the **right to request flexible working** arrangements to all parents with young children (0-6), with the aim of progressively extending this right to all family carers.
5. Extending the length of time after birth when mothers can take **breaks at work to breastfeed** to at least 12 months.