

REPORT ON THE CHALLENGES OF SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE

(WHY MOTHERS MAY OR MAY NOT WANT TO SHARE THEIR MATERNITY LEAVE)

ERNESTINE GHEYOH NDZI

UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE

APRIL 2018

Background

Shared Parental Leave was introduced in December 2014 by the Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2014¹ that applies to children who were born or adopted on or after 5 April 2015. The father and mother (or parent of the new-born/adopted child in cases of gay or straight couples) are able to share 50 weeks of shared parental leave after the mother has taken the initial 2 weeks after birth.² This leave must be taken in the first year following the birth of the child. To be eligible for shared parental leave, both father and mother (or parent) must be employees and have been employed for at least 26 weeks by the fifteenth week before the expected week of childbirth.³ Both parents would have to remain in employment until the week before shared parental leave.⁴ The mother must be entitled to take maternity leave or maternity allowance (in the case of self-employed) and have either given notice to their employers that their leave will end or have returned to work.⁵

Although this approach could be welcome as a positive step toward gender equality, not many parents are taking advantage of it. The Government had estimated that 280,000 families would be eligible to benefit from shared parental leave, but predicted uptake of 2% to 8%. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)⁶ survey of 1000 parents found just 5% uptake for new fathers and 8% for new mothers. Working Families based on data from 940,000 employees, showed that between 0.5% and 2% of eligible fathers had taken shared parental leave. According to recent research by EMW, just 8,700 new parents took advantage of the Shared Parental Leave system in 2016/17 making up less than 1% of the number of parents eligible.⁷ Mothers not wanting to share their maternity leave was highlighted amongst others as the reason for the low uptake of shared parental leave. My Family Care reporting a 1% take up in 2016 highlighted that some of the reasons why shared parental leave uptake was low was because mothers did not want to share their maternity leave with the dads. Over half of mums (55%) in their sample (1000 parents) said they did not want to share their Maternity Leave with their partners and 60% of men strongly agreed that partners would prefer to take all the leave themselves.⁸ In 2017, My Family Care highlighted three key barriers to the

¹ Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2014 No. 3050

² Employment Rights Act 1996, s.75F(2)

³ The Shared Parental Leave Regulations 2014, reg. 33(1)

⁴ *ibid*, reg. 5(2)(a) and 35.

⁵ *ibid*, reg. 5(3)(c) and (d).

⁶ CIPD, 'Working Parents need more support from government and employer' 14 December 2016

⁷ Jon Taylor, JUST 8,700 NEW PARENTS CLAIMED SHARED PARENTAL LEAVE IN THE LAST YEAR, EMW, 18th Feb 2018, <https://www.emwillp.com/latest/claimed-shared-parental/>

⁸ My Family Care, 'Shared Parental Leave: Where Are We Now' (20th April 2016)

uptake of shared parental leave, which included mother’s reluctance to share, financial cost and culture.⁹

Aims of study

To investigate parents’ awareness of shared parental leave

To examine couples communication and confidence in decision making on shared parental leave

To identify the factors that influences mothers to share or not to share

To explore attitudes to shared parental leave

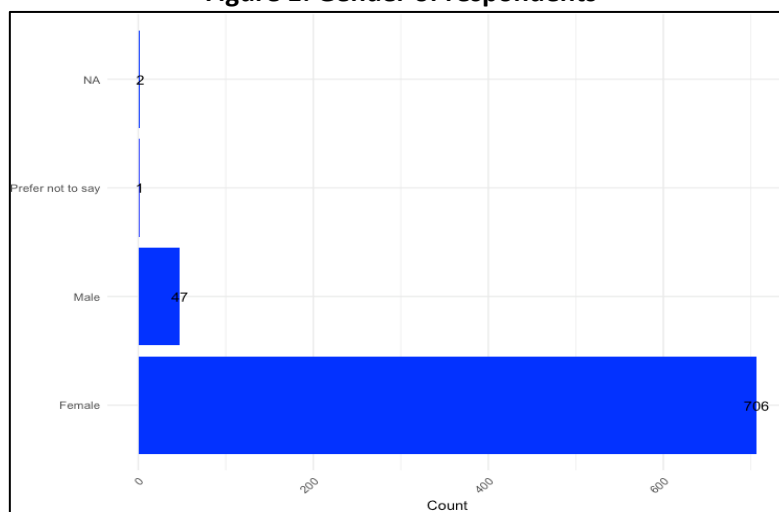
Methodology

An online survey was set up to capture data to answer the research questions. Working Families and Bright Horizon Family Solution, facilitated the dissemination of the survey link to potential participants through their companies social media outlets. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the University of Hertfordshire. There was an excellent response rate of 756 which form the basis of this preliminary report.

Profile of Respondents

The respondents were women by a majority of 93.5% (706) to 6.2% (47) males, 1 person who preferred not to disclose their gender and 2 respondents who did not respond. This is likely to reflect that research question which is why mothers may/may not want to share their maternity leave.

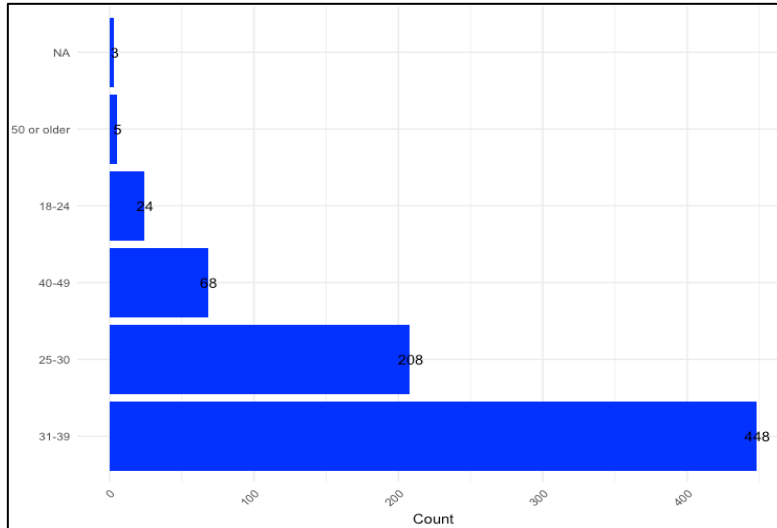
Figure 1: Gender of respondents



⁹ My Family Care, ‘Shared Parental Leave: Two Years On’ 5th April 2017, <https://www.myfamilycare.co.uk/resources/news/shared-parental-leave-two-years-on/>

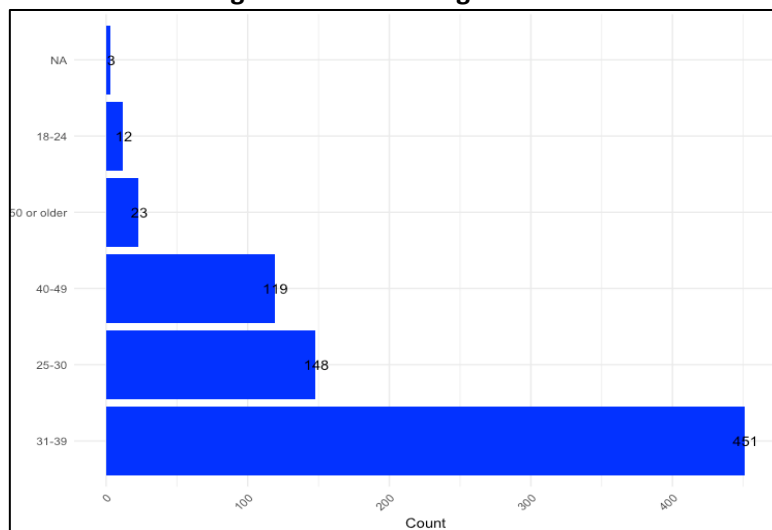
The age range of the respondents were as expected (31-39 years) in line with the ONS age for childbearing mothers and fathers in England and Wales. This age group formed the majority (59.5%) of the respondents followed by the 25 to 30 years old (27.6%) that was almost half the number of respondents (9%) from 41 to 49 years old. Furthermore, a higher number of respondents were in 50+ years compared to the 18 to 24. There were 3 respondents who did not disclose their ages.

Figure 2: Age Bracket



The age distribution of the respondent's partners is similar to that of the responders as expected. Most of the respondent partners fall in the age bracket of 31- 39 years by a majority of 59.9%. Respondent partners within the age range of 25 to 30 were only slightly more than those in the age range of 40 to 49.

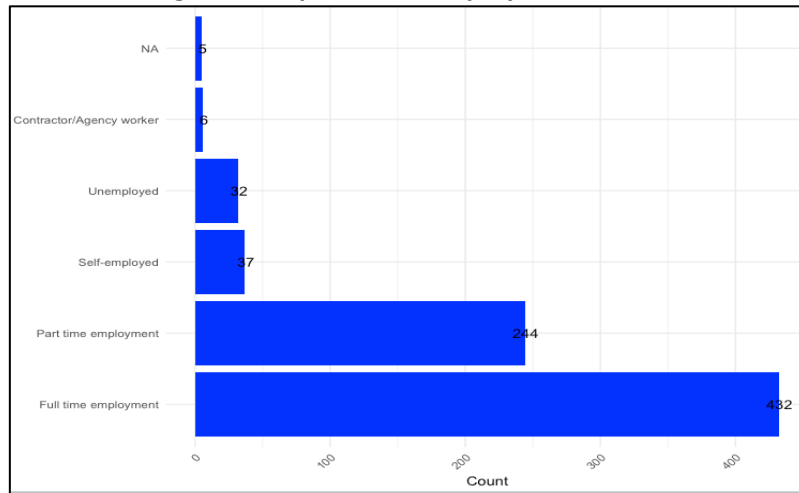
Figure 3: Partner's Age Bracket



As seen in the figure 4 below, most of the respondents who took the survey had either a full time employment (57.1%) or a part time employment (32.2%). This indicates that most of the respondents would have been eligible for shared parental leave in terms of whether or not they are employees. 4.9% respondents indicated that they were self-employed, 4.3% were unemployed, 0.8%

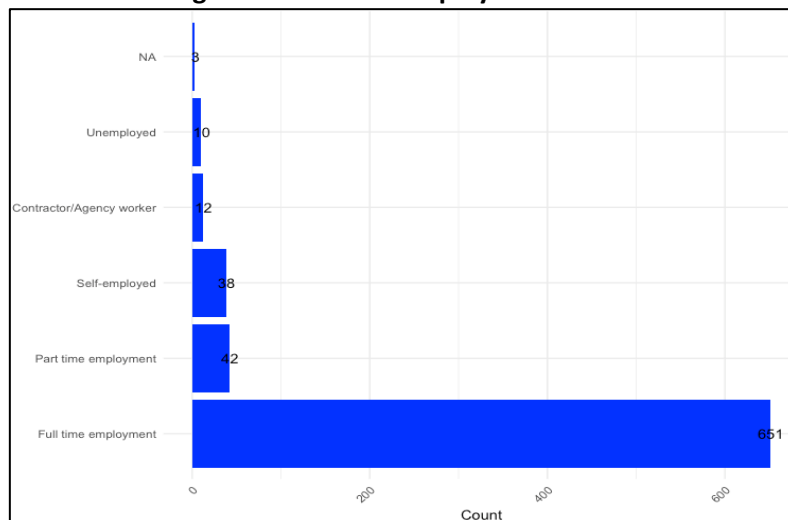
were Contractor/Agency workers, and 5 did not indicate any employment status which could pose a challenge on their eligibility to take shared parental leave. According to shared parental leave regulation, contractor/agency workers and the unemployed would not be eligible to benefit from shared parental leave. However, the self-employed could benefit from shared parental leave if they are the mother, but self-employed dads will not be eligible.

Figure 4 Respondent's Employment Status



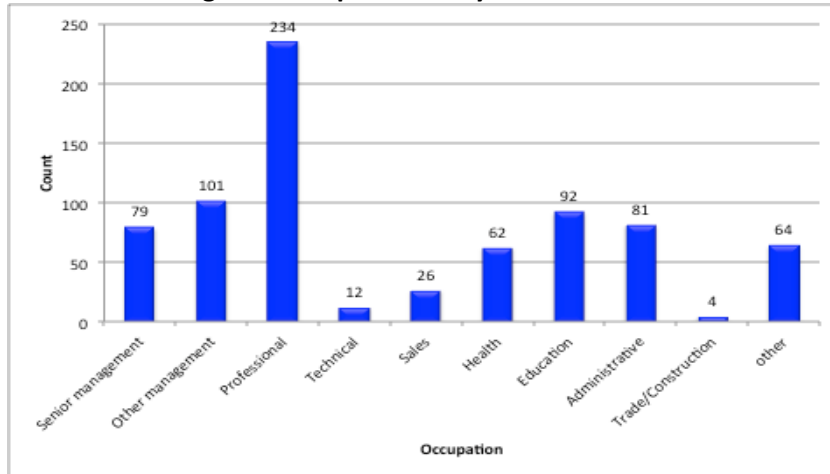
The respondent partner's employment status distribution is a little different from that of the respondents. Most of the respondent's partners (86.1%) are full time and with 5.6% part timers. This indicates that almost 93% of the total respondents were potentially eligible for shared parental leave. The 5% self-employed, 1.6% contract or agency workers and 10 unemployed may not qualify for shared parental leave

Figure 5: Partners Employment Status



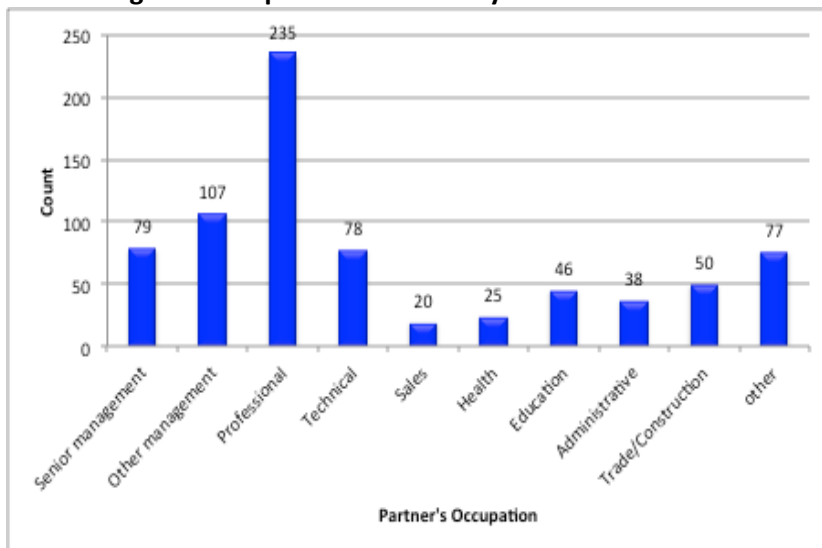
The distribution below shows most 31.5% of the respondents were in a professional occupation, 24.1% were in management position, 12.3% in education, or held an administrative position 10.9%.

Figure 6: Respondents by sector of work



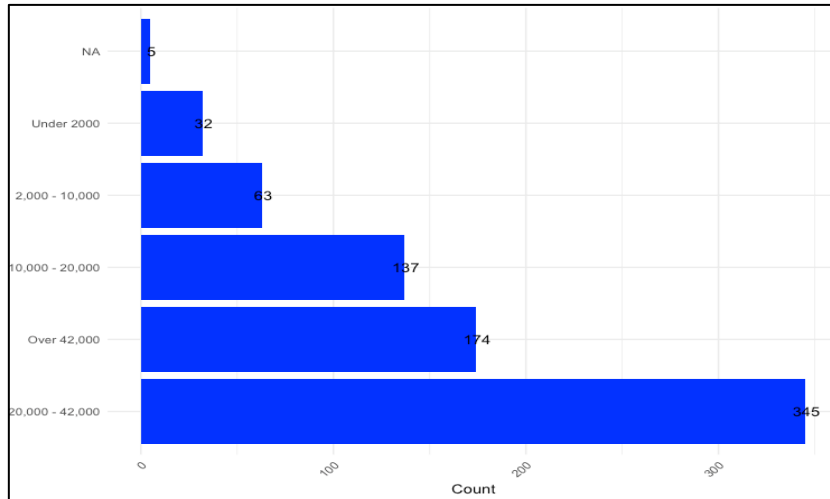
Similar to the occupation of the respondents, their partners either were professionals (31.6%) or were involved in management (24.9%), with some in the technical industry (10.4%).

Figure 7: Respondent Partner by sector of work



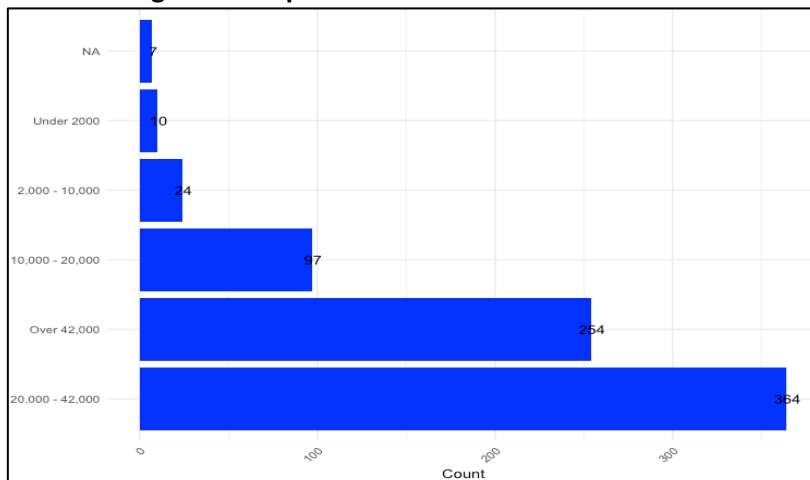
A majority (45.6%) of the respondent's income brackets range between £20000 and £420000 followed by those with income greater than £42000 by 23%.

Figure 8: Respondent Income Bracket



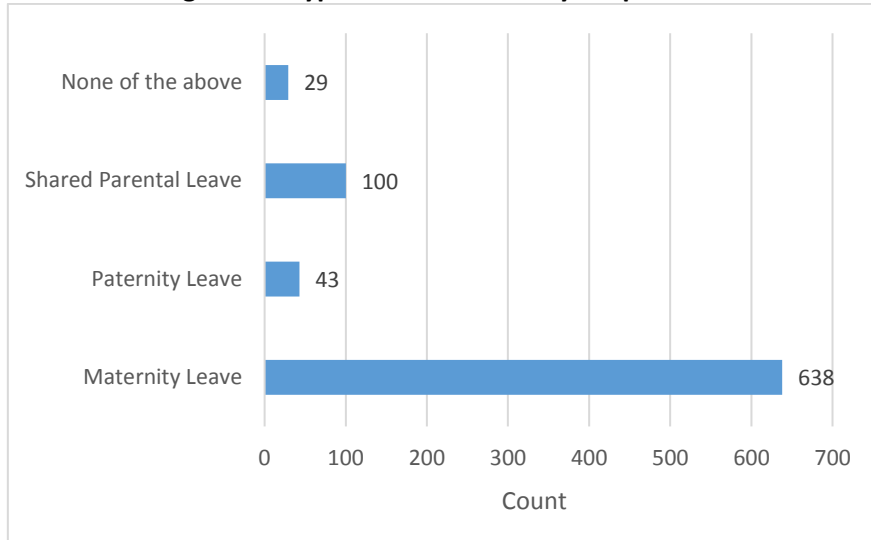
The distribution of respondent partners' income is similar to that of the respondents in terms of the numbers earning between £20,000 – £42,000 by 48.1%. However, more partners earned over £42,000 (33.9%) compared to the number of respondent that earned that much.

Figure 9: Respondent Partners Income Bracket



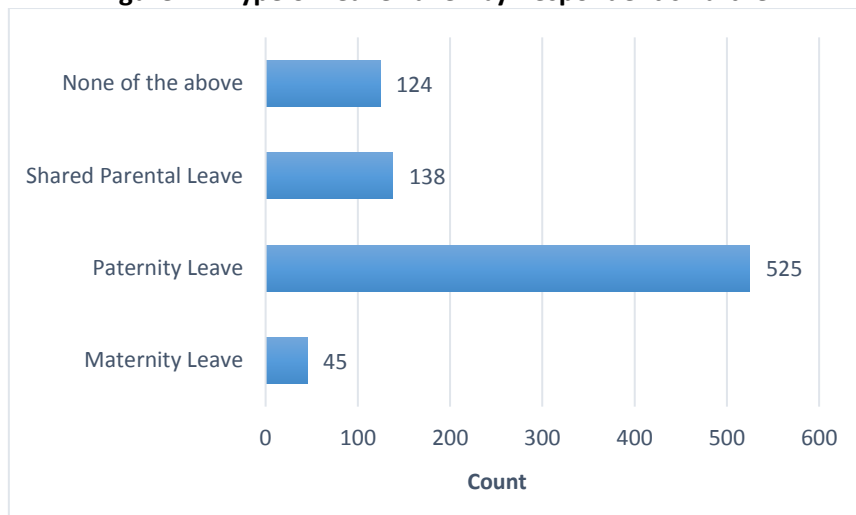
The number of respondents that took maternity leave are consistent with the gender of people that completed the survey. Most respondent took maternity leave (84.3%), and 13.3% took SPL. The 29 respondents who did not take any leave at all, may be representing the self-employed, agency and the unemployed respondents. 47 of the respondents were males and 43 took paternity leave, indicating that 4 male respondents did not take paternity leave.

Figure 10: Type of Leave Taken by Respondent



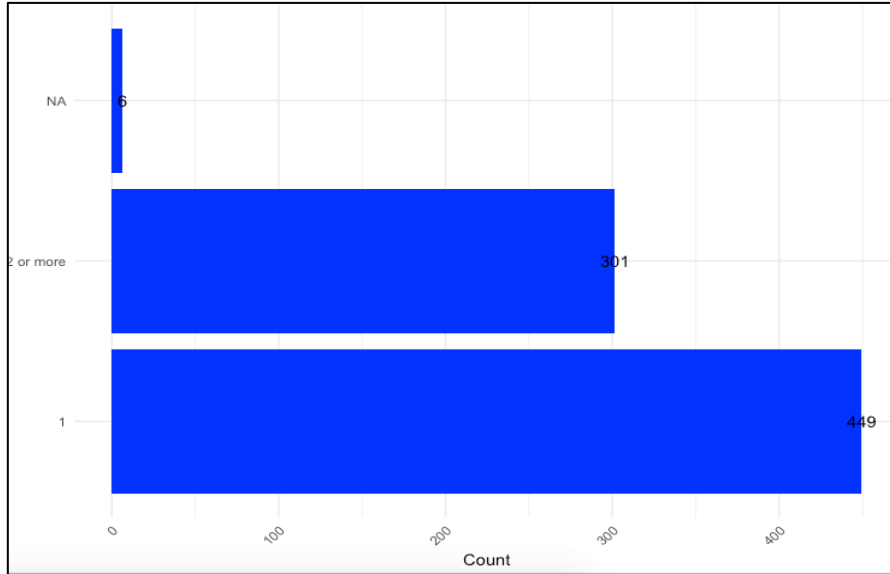
As expected, many of the respondents' partners (69.4%) took paternity leave. However, more partners seem to have taken shared parental leave than the numbers disclosed by the respondents with a difference of 100-138 responses representing 18.2% uptake of shared parental leave. This could be explain by the fact that some mothers think shared parental leave is only for dad ignoring the fact that it is for both. The results also indicate that 16.4% partners did not take any leave type. This may be taking into account all the respondents that were not eligible for shared parental leave and dads who take annual leave instead of paternity leave for financial reasons.

Figure 11: Type of Leave Taken by Respondent's Partner



Majority of the respondents (59.9%) had a single child, while 40.1% had 2 or more children.

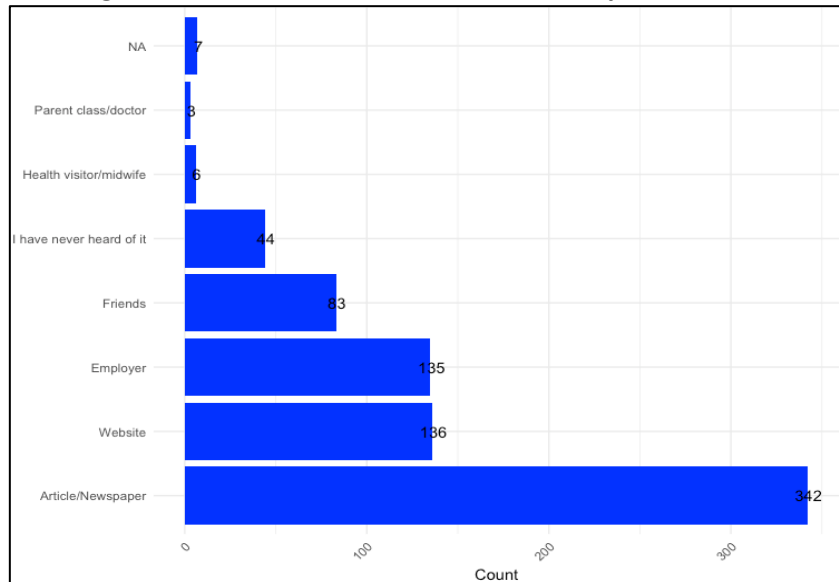
Figure 12: Number of Children respondent had



Respondents Awareness of shared parental leave

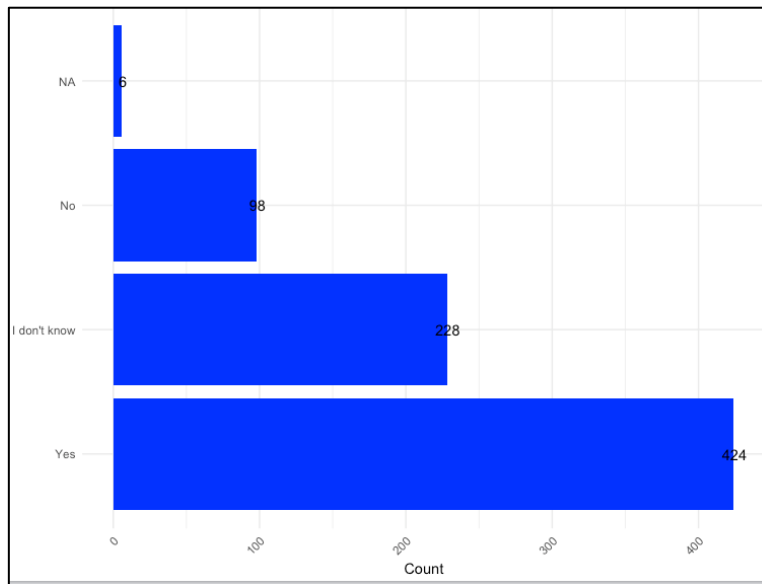
It is interesting that the majority (45.2%) of respondents heard of SPL through the news articles or newspapers. The number of respondents who read about it through the government website (18.2%) or heard from their employer (18%) are almost the same. Some of the respondents had never heard of it until they came across the survey.

Figure 13: Source of information on shared parental leave



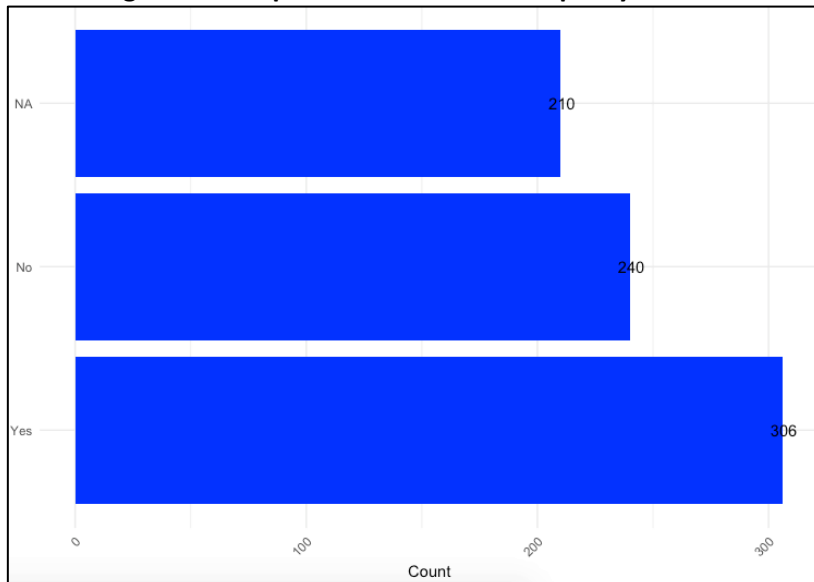
A large proportion (56%) of respondents indicated that there is an SPL policy in their work place. However, a significant number of 30.1% respondents indicated that they were not aware of whether or not there exist a work place policy on shared parental leave. Interestingly 12.9% respondents said that their workplace had no policy on shared parental leave.

Figure 14: Respondent awareness on the existence of a work place policy on Shared Parental Leave



Although a majority (40.2%) of the respondents indicated that they know how to access shared parental leave policy at work, 31.7% of respondent indicated they do not have access to shared parental leave policy at work. The number of respondents (27.7%) that responded 'Not Applicable' were consistent with the number of respondents that indicated that they do not know whether their workplace had a policy on shared parental leave.

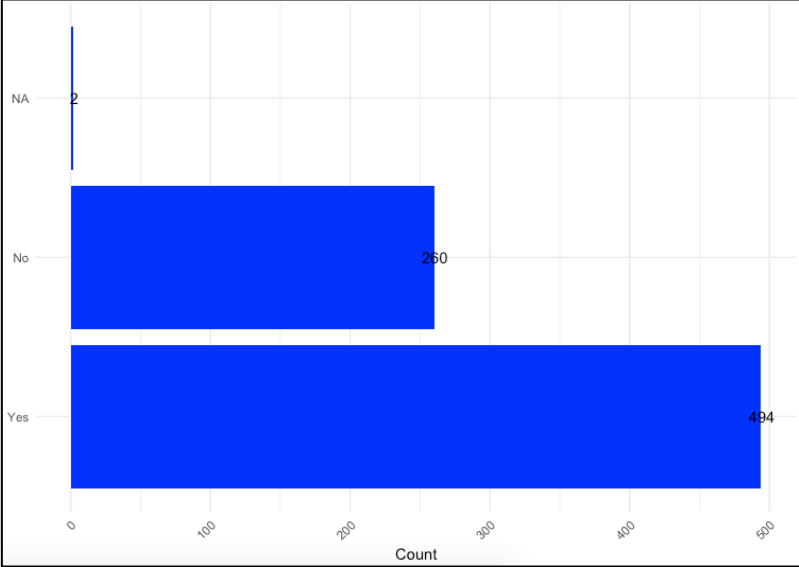
Figure 15: Respondents access to SPL policy at work



Majority of the respondents (65.3%) indicated that they have a good understanding of how shared parental leave works. However, 34.3% respondents indicated unawareness of how shared parental

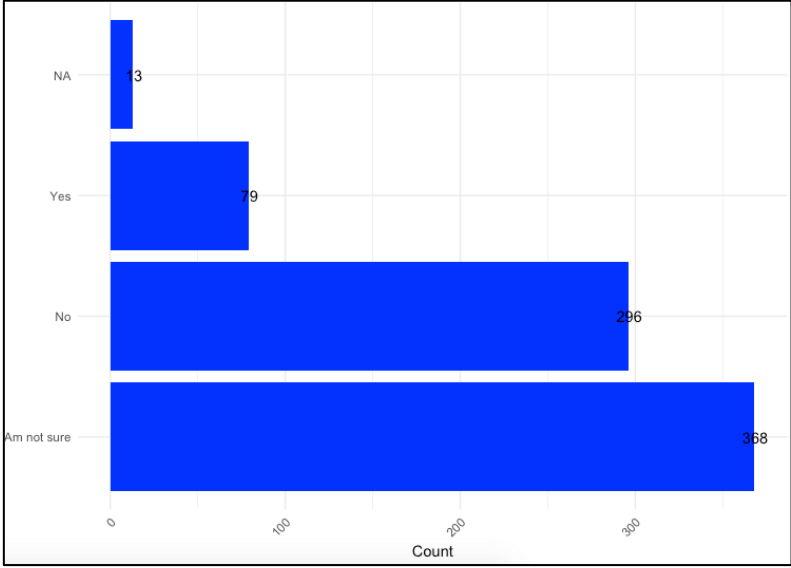
leave works, which is consistent with past research that demonstrated that lack of awareness, is one of the reasons why the uptake of shared parental leave is low.

Figure 16: Respondents understanding of how Shared Parental Leave Works



Majority of the respondents (48.6%) indicated that there were not sure whether the employer enhances shared parental leave pay. This demonstrates a lack of awareness of workplace policy of shared parental leave. 39.1% indicated that shared parental leave pay is not enhance at work and 10.6% said their employers do enhance SPL.

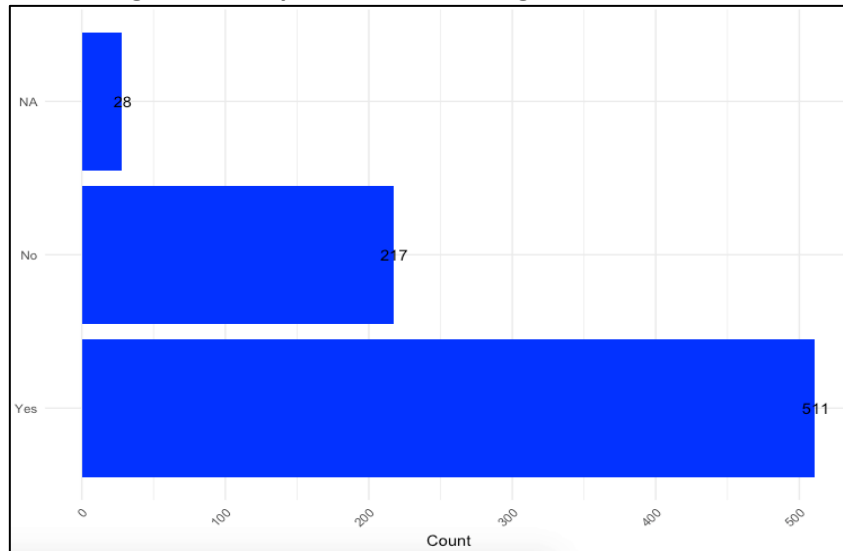
Figure 17: Respondents awareness of whether shared parental leave pay is enhance at work



Respondent’s consideration of shared parental leave benefit

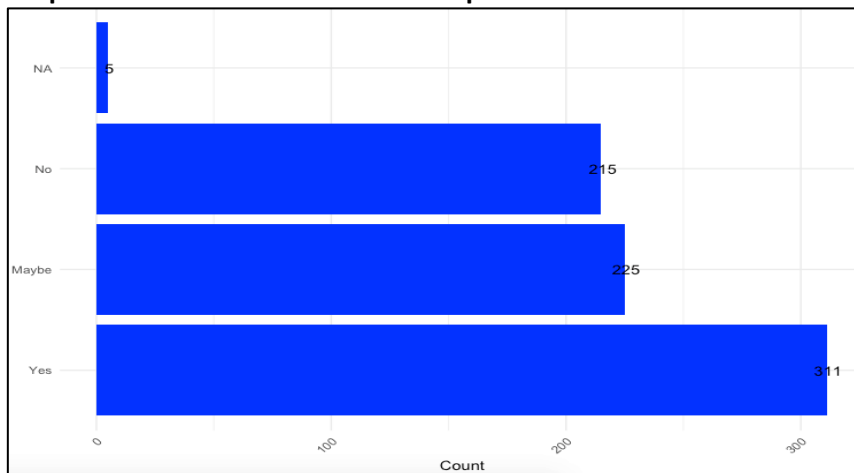
Interestingly almost 67.5% percent of respondents had considered the benefit of shared parental leave, which is consistent with the number of respondents that had heard of shared parental leave. While 28.7% indicated that, they did not consider the benefits of shared parental leave, which is consistent with the number of respondent that were not aware of shared parental leave.

Figure 18: Respondent considering the benefit of SPL



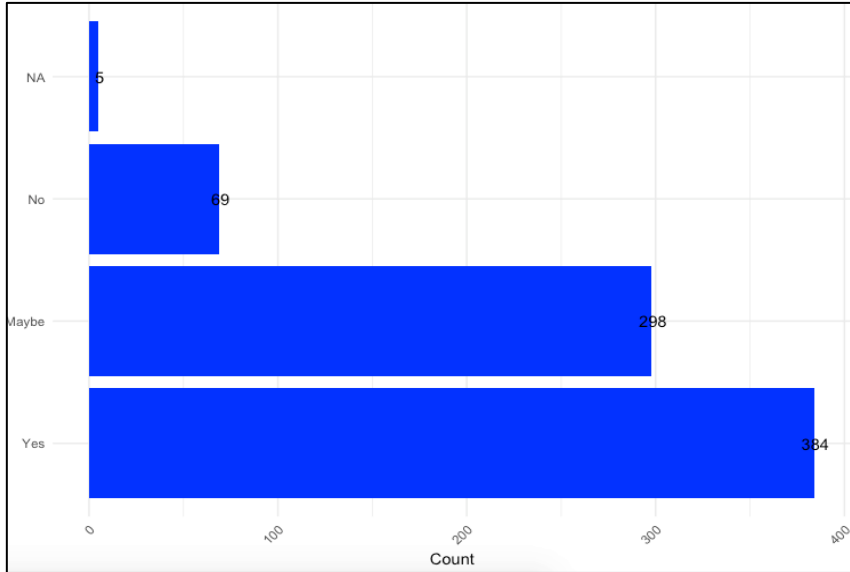
41.1% of the respondents agreed that shared parental leave would benefit the child and the family. However, a significant number were either unsure (58.2%) or failed to see how it would benefit the child and the family.

Figure 19: Respondents consideration of shared parental leave benefit to the child or family



Consistent with the respondents that considered the benefit of SPL on the child and family and whether dads would prefer extended paternity leave, a 39.1% of the respondents were unsure whether SPL could have a positive impact on women’s career. A small number of 9.2% respondents thought that SPL would not have a positive impact on women’s careers. Overall 51.1% agreed that shared parental leave would have a positive effect on women’s career.

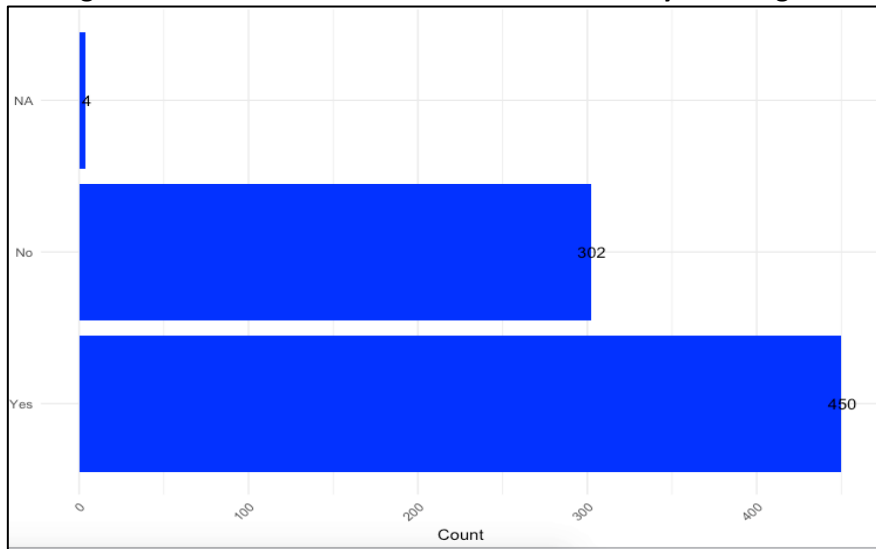
Figure 20: Impact of SPL on Women's Careers



Household consideration of shared parental leave

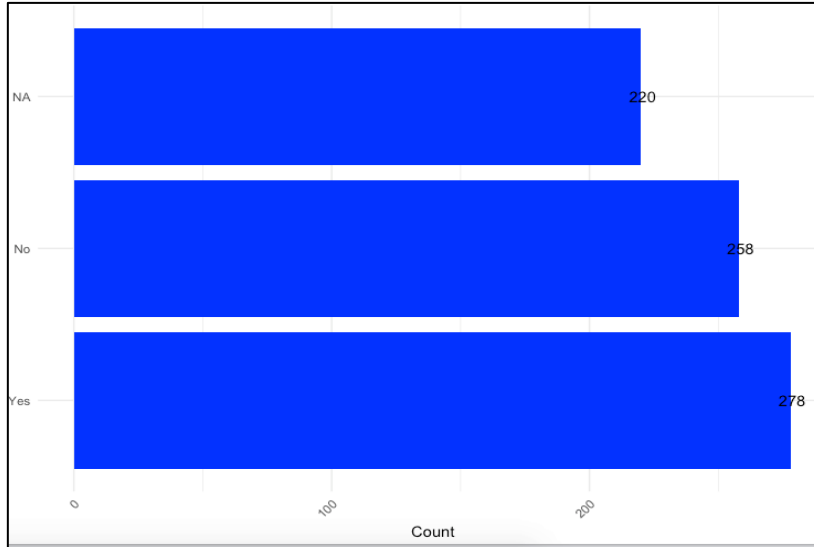
Most (59.8%) of the respondent had a conversation with their partners about shared parental leave. A 40.2% said they did not discuss about shared parental leave with their partners. This is interesting because a lack of discussion between partners would mean non-uptake of shared parental leave.

Figure 21: Conversation with Partner on Possibility of taking SPL



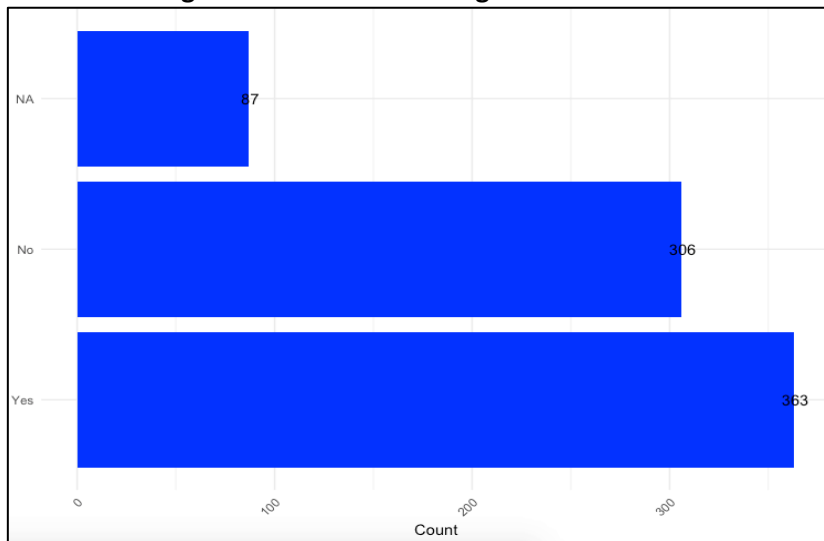
The response on mum and dads confidence to take shared parental leave is consistent with the number of respondent that indicated that they had a conversation with their partners on shared parental leave. Majority (36.7%) of the respondent that had a conversation with their partners about shared parental leave were confident in discussion about the possibility of benefiting from the regulation. Almost half (34.1%) of the respondent indicated that they were not confident considering the opportunity to take shared parental leave.

Figure 22: Couple Confidence on Taking SPL



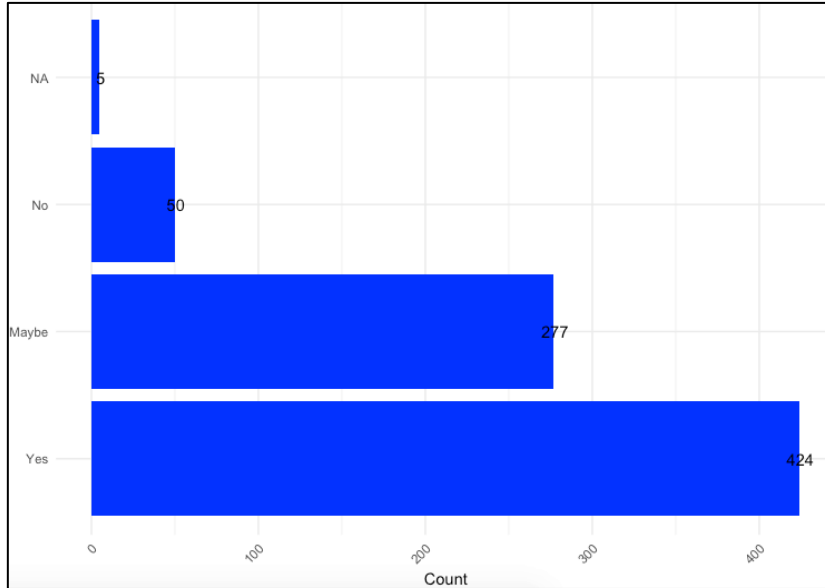
Most (48%) of the respondents indicated that their partners were willing to take SPL which is higher than the number of respondent (36.7%) who were confident in discussing the possibility of taking shared parental leave. This indicate that mum and dads may want to benefit from shared parental leave, but there may be factors that make them uncomfortable to do so. 40.4% however, indicated that their partners were not willing to take shared parental leave.

Figure 23: Partner's Willingness to take SPL



Although a majority (56%) of the respondents think fathers will prefer paternity leave to shared parental leave, 36.6% were not sure and 0.6% did not think dads would prefer an extended paternity leave, which is consistent with the number of respondents who were unsure of how shared parental leave could benefit their child or family.

Figure 24: Fathers extended paternity leave preference over shared parental leave



Respondents Preferences on why mothers may not want to share their leave

Respondents were given a set of reason to choose from (with the option of choosing as many as they needed and the opportunity to add other factors necessary) to explain why mothers may not want to share their maternity leave with their partners as highlighted by past research.

Table 1: Preferences

| | % |
|--|-------------|
| Mother feel they have earned the right to take all or the majority of any leave after the birth of a child | 39.2 |
| Mothers think there is a natural expectation for them to take any or all of the leave after the birth of a child | 34.7 |
| Fathers would be criticized by their work colleagues or friends for taking SPL | 24.9 |
| Couples cannot afford financially to both take shared parental leave | 65.9 |
| Extended family will not support father taking shared parental leave | 1.1 |
| SPL will negatively affect father’s career | 10.5 |
| Father's may struggle looking after a new born baby and doing other house work that mothers would easily do | 10.4 |
| It’s necessary for mothers to take all the leave to improve their health after birth | 21.1 |

| | |
|--|-------------|
| I do not agree that mothers do not want to share their maternity leave | 29.3 |
| Mothers don't just want to share | 17.4 |
| Breastfeeding | 19.4 |

The majority of the respondents felt that financial cost was the reason why mothers do not want to share their leave (65.9 per cent). However, 39.2 per cent indicated that mothers feel they have earned the right to take all or majority of the leave. In addition to the above table, respondent added the following.

Some of the mothers feel less confident in leaving their babies with their partners based on their experience of partner's attitude.

'It's not that I as a mother does not want to share my leave but my husband does not want to take full responsibility of looking after my children. At home on his days off he pushes most of the childcare responsibilities to me. This is the reason why I have to spend 8 months on maternity instead of intended 6 months. I believe if the fathers are willing to take full responsibility of looking after the children then shared parental responsibilities would be a good idea and concept.'

I didn't want to share mine because I noted how my husband used his paternity leave as 'holiday' and just floated about the house making more mess for me to clean up and not actually helping me at all with the baby. He made the most difficult time of my life a lot harder for me and I needed him to go back to work so that he would be out of the way!

'My husband is able to sleep through our baby waking in the night, even when he does do a night feed I have to wake him to do this, I don't think any mother is able to sleep through their baby waking, even if they had to go to work in the morning.'

Some of the mothers still feel deeply rooted in the tradition of fathers being the breadwinners of the family and the mothers being the primary care givers.

In our household our roles are traditional i.e. He's the breadwinner and I'm the homemaker, then our house would have been in total chaos! I don't believe though that women don't 'want' to share their leave (because it's not bloody time off when you're caring for an infant!) but it has financial and practical implications for the majority of households in this country.

Most of the respondents highlighted breastfeeding as the key reason why they did not share their maternity leave with their partners. Furthermore, some of the respondents expressed that they were not keen on expressing breastmilk.

"For breastfeeding Mothers, sharing leave isn't always practical. Given the WHO guidelines suggest babies are ideally breastfed until 2 years (and beyond). Fathers taking leave whilst Mum goes back to work doesn't support this.

It isn't in line with the recommendation to breastfeed exclusively for 6 months and alongside solids for 2 years and more. Companies do not have policies or facilities in place for women to express at work (at least it is not the norm) so until this changes if a woman wants to breastfeed the SPL will not work.

Breastfeeding is hard to do when your back at work yes you can express however its time consuming to express and store and reheat bottles every day/night, you would have to be extremely organised

with dates on bottles for expressing and refrigerated or frozen milk. It's hard enough getting your head around taking care of newborn but to then have to check every feed and trust that it's still viable to give to your newborn instead of just normal breast feeding creates not just one more thing to think about but 5/6. Breastfeeding wouldn't last until the recommended first year as it would be too hard to maintain on top of working, so formula would consequently be used so baby doesn't get the added health benefits of breast milk when formula is used as a substitute.

Some respondents indicated the fact that they would love to take shared parental leave concurrently, but that would mean sending their child to the nursery early, which they do not want to do.

We ideally wanted more time as a family with the baby. However, using SPL to do this (by taking leave at the same time) would mean I have to return to work sooner and therefore leave the baby in the care of others at a younger age. We decided not to do this as we'd like our child to be as old as possible before we have to start using child care."

Some of the respondents expressed the fact that dads do not want to share as a reason for not taking shared parental leave.

My husband didn't even think/consider SPL. No way would he be willing to turn off his work phone for months. He's a workaholic. I had no choice but to take maternity leave.

Some of the respondent pointed out that the policy was too bureaucratic

Policies can be confusing and this is compounded by poor take up. My husband found it difficult to take up spl as his employer didn't know how to handle it, despite a policy.

We chose not to take SPL as it was better for my husband to take paid and unpaid leave rather than the hurdles of sharing mat leave. It's bureaucratically difficult to do.

Policies can be confusing and this is compounded by poor take up. My husband found it difficult to take up spl as his employer didn't know how to handle it, despite a policy.

Others stated that mother just want to spend more time with the baby therefore being unable to let go that time.

I find being pregnant very difficult, 9 months is a long time for your body to not be yours, and obviously giving birth is not super easy either, I feel I am able to get myself through those 9 months and giving birth not only knowing I will have my beautiful child but that I will have all this precious time to spend with my children after.

Mothers health before and after birth was another reason highlighted by 21.1% of the survey respondents as to why mothers may not want to share their maternity leave.

I think it's a lot of pressure on women to try and have it all at once. I suffered hyperemesis in my pregnancy and learned I simply couldn't work how I used to, I was signed off a lot. I've accepted my career will go on the back burner for a while

Pregnancy for my partner was quite a debilitating experience, the maternity leave was necessary as it got to the point where she could not stand for long periods (her job requires a lot of standing). After childbirth she was again hit by physiological problems that would have made an early return to work very painful - if not impossible. Sepsis required a 10 day stay in hospital. In addition, she was unfortunate enough to suffer from post-natal depression. This meant that initially she was not able to leave the house alone.

For me personally I didn't have a very good birth with my son and having 9 months off with him gave me chance to recover from the birth and to bond with my son as having an emergency c section left me feeling very detached from him and knowing I had plenty of time to build that bond was reassuring for me mentally and physically.

The effect on dad's career

With my career and earnings already taking a hit for the baby, why do the same for my husband who may be passed over for promotion if he disappeared for 3 months?

Mother and dad's nature and type of work

The reason we didn't share more of the leave is because I am a paramedic working long and varied shifts and I wanted to breastfeed on demand until past 1 year. This would not have been possible if I had returned to work prior to 1 year. My partner took 2 weeks paternity leave and 3 weeks SPL at the end of the year.

My partner is also in the Royal Navy so the rules are very different. Due to his work commitments even if we wanted and were able to take SPL, I don't think this would be possible. I am currently due to give birth mid deployment and my baby will be 5 months old when he returns. I know his request would be refused as they need him on ship.

Dad's health

In my own case, it was because I wanted to spend that time with my baby myself, giving her the very best I could. My husband is disabled and could not have provided her with the same opportunities. There is no help or support for disabled parents to help with caring for a baby.

Having a child is life changing, some cope with it better than others, as a mother it felt like I was born to do this, my husband has taken nearly 18 months to feel confident on his own for a day. To be fair he has his own mental health problems (PTSD) which is likely to have influenced this significantly in that he has wanted to do more but he has struggled to soothe our daughter and that has caused tension and I have feared putting them both in that position.

Shared parental leave not enhanced

We both work for the NHS and are eligible for Enhanced Maternity Pay due to how've long we've worked for the NHS. However, if we'd taken SPL, we'd have lost the enhanced pay so would've been financially much worse off! The NHS doesn't allow us both to have enhanced pay despite us both having worked for the NHS for a long time.

Employer's lack of support

Employers also need to treat men the same as women when negotiating the split. My partners employer tried to dictate what he could take and made it difficult when renegotiating the spl when out plans changed.

My employer seemed to view me as on my way out as soon as I said I was pregnant with no talk of career progression, so it made more sense for my partner to use the time to focus on his career as I would be unlikely to return to the same company."

My husband's workplace is a small local firm and not very supportive of shared parental leave. I'm management in a large college which actively support SPL. furthermore I earn more than my husband and would like him to go part time while I return full time. Again his company are

unsupportive. I think workplaces need to ensure SPL is normalised, big or small. I also think my husband is worried about how he will be perceived taking SPL or going part time.

Experience of sharing

The pay gap makes/made it very challenging for us to share our leave. My husband shared the last 2 months of my leave, but we have to save so we could afford to be without his wage, (we had mine instead, but I earn half of what he does!).

I had an employee who took parental leave for 6mths and he was highly criticised by other managers even though I explained it. Fathers may fear opinions of people (work and social) even if it doesn't negatively impact their prospects.

Summary of main points

- The majority of the respondents were in the professional and management.
- Information on the nature of employment suggested that most of the respondents were eligible for shared parental leave
- A large number of people are still taking predominantly maternity and paternity leave. However, the study suggest that there has been 18.3% uptake of shared parental leave.
- Most of the respondents heard of shared parental leave from an article or newspaper, suggesting that employers are not making eligible employee aware of the existence of shared parental leave. Furthermore, 18.2% of the respondents never heard of shared parental leave until they came across the survey. This indicates that awareness is still a challenge to shared parental leave.
- 56.5% of the respondents indicated that their workplace had a policy on SPL, 65.5% said they understand how SPL works, and 56% indicated that they could easily access SPL policy at work. However, only 10.6% indicated that their workplace enhances SPL pay, which supports the point why many indicated that finance was the reason why mothers do not want to share their maternity leave.
- 70.2% of the respondent said they had considered the benefit of SPL, but only 41.4% thought that SPL would benefit the child or the family. 51.1% agreed that SPL could positively influence women's career.
- 59.8% indicated that they had a conversation with their partners to discuss SPL. 51.1% indicated that they felt confident discussing about the possibility of taking shared parental leave and 54.3% of the partners were willing to take SPL.
- 17.4% indicated that mothers do not want to share their leave, 39.2% feel mothers earned the right to maternity leave and 34.7% feel mothers think it is a natural expectation for them to take maternity leave. However, 29.3% said they do not agree that mothers do not want to say.
- The reason why mother do not want to share their leave include among others: financial cost (65.9%), father could be criticized by friends and colleagues (24.9%), SPL will negatively affect dad's career (10.5%), mothers health after birth (21.1%).
- Other factors provided by the respondents included; breastfeeding, dad's health, employer lack of support, shared parental leave pay not enhanced, mothers' lack of confidence in dad's attitude, dad's not wanting to share, mother and dad's nature of pattern of work and the bureaucratic nature of SPL.

Background on researcher

Ernestine Gheyoh Ndzi is a senior lecturer with the Hertfordshire Law School at the University of Hertfordshire. She has written and published on the impact of breastfeeding on shared parental leave, and the importance of awareness on the uptake of shared parental leave.