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Economic Objections to the Policies of the Government of India in Supporting Cultural Motherhood

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Cultural motherhood
Economic efficiency
Opportunity costs
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Women, being equally valuable resources as labour, human capital, and entrepreneurs, should be treated and given enough opportunities and free choices to improve the allocative efficiency of the economy. In these changing times, it is not enough to say no to choice—we must actively work toward defeating motherhood as an idea and practice. Per the data provided by the International Labour Organisation, female labour force participation has gradually declined from 28.8% to 24% for females aged 15 and more. This paper highlights the economic consequences of gender-equality policies in India and the incapacity of the policymakers to analyse the consequences of such gender-insensitive policies. The author explains and discusses how society, especially the patriarchal family in India, is overutilizing a woman's motherhood, making women invest more than the optimal level of mothering on the one hand and making men perform less motherhood/parenthood than the socially efficient level. The researcher has collected primary and secondary data to analyse the government's leave policy. Upon interviewing more than 100 women and men directly or indirectly involved in childcare through WhatsApp and other calling mediums, it is analysed that motherhood or mothering is heavily understood as the women's primary job rather than the equally shared and rarely efficiently distributed between the birth givers.

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1. Introduction

India is one of the world's fastest-growing leading economies ([Jha, 2019](#)). However, as per the data provided by the International Labour Organisation, female labour-force participation has gradually declined from 28.8% to 24% for females aged 15 and older ([ILO, 2023](#)). Social factors such as the prevalence of bias on gender views on women's roles in the family as a mother and wife, the economic and political landscape, and lower recruitment all contribute to this decline ([Friedmann & Efrat-Treister, 2022](#)). As Childcare is still primarily the



responsibility of women all over the globe, the retention of working women in jobs after becoming a mother is one of the factors that urgently requires the attention of policymakers ([Urke et al., 2018](#)). Working parents significantly contribute to the economy's growth but frequently juggle between work and supporting and caring for their children and families.

“Women globally spend roughly four times as much time as men on unpaid labour, including childcare in the Asia and Pacific. In Asia and the Pacific, men perform the lowest share of unpaid care work of all regions (1 hour and 4 minutes), with 28 minutes in Pakistan (or 8.0 percent of men’s total working time) and only 31 minutes in India (7.9 percent)” ([ILO, 2018](#)).

According to a McKinsey 2021 study, women do 75% of all unpaid care work worldwide, investing more than one trillion hours per year on unpaid labour that includes childcare, elderly care, cooking, and cleaning, where the annual value of this labour is around \$10 trillion ([Mckinsey, 2021](#)). Mothers frequently face a trade-off between working and caring for their children without quality childcare (Carney, 2023; Wuestenenk & Begall, 2022). When mothers choose the latter, their careers are often derailed or terminated (Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Sanders, 2022; Smith & Sinkford, 2022). According to a study by a professor from the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, women aged 15 to 60 spend 7.2 hours on unpaid domestic work compared to 2.8 hours for men, indicating "time poverty." ([Economic Times, 2023](#)). Employer-sponsored childcare leaves and services can reduce transaction costs of women to work, increase women's participation in labor, improve businesses, and increase India's economic growth ([Nicoletti et al., 2023](#)).

As representatives of our society, governments worldwide have come a long way in the past few decades. Since today’s generation is more willing than ever to take on new challenges and embrace change for the better, leaders are ready to adapt to the recent changes and are constantly trying to work towards the current generation's needs. We have witnessed changes in our government policies worldwide, trying to advance gender equality. Policies enforcing gender parity and equal pay for equal labour at all organisational levels intend to create a gender-neutral society over a patriarchal society. India is also experiencing such changes in its socioeconomic policies, and there have been some encouraging advancements in the last 20 years regarding gender equality at work and in payment ([Bennedsen et al., 2023](#); [Dhar-Bhattacharjee & Dwivedi, 2024](#); [Penner et al., 2022](#); [Sengupta & Puri, 2022](#); [Neff & Betz, 2017](#)).

In her article, "The Opportunity Costs of Childbearing: More than Mothers' Business," H Joshi highlights childbearing's economic and societal impacts on women. While many discussions surrounding motherhood often focus on the physical and emotional tolls, Joshi argues that the opportunity costs of childbearing are often overlooked. When a woman decides to have a child, she may give up career opportunities, wage increases, and valuable work experience. In many cases, mothers are forced to take time off from work to care for their children, which can result in a loss of income and a setback in career advancement. Joshi points out that this loss of income and experience can have long-term effects on a woman's financial stability and retirement savings ([Joshi, 1998](#)).

One of the biggest challenges facing mothers is the need to balance work and motherhood. They usually give up their jobs because no childcare leave is available to them or their spouses ([Sandler & Szembrot, 2020](#)). Even if they work in government organisations, balancing work and motherhood can create stress and anxiety. Due to the imposed motherhood (cultural mothering), Mothers feel guilty for not being able to spend enough time with their children or not giving 100% to their job. This can create a sense of burnout and negatively affect mental



health and well-being ([Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018](#); [Modak et al., 2023](#); [Riyono & Rezki, 2022](#)). Furthermore, the societal impact of childbearing is often overlooked. Women with children are often viewed as less committed to their careers, which can lead to negative stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace ([Parcesepe et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, the assumption that women will bear the majority of the burden of childcare perpetuates the restricted role of a woman in decision-making in the organisation.

2. Research Methods

The researcher uses doctrinal legal research and has collected primary and secondary data to analyse the government's leave policy ([Hamad et al., 2022](#); [Pratiwi, et al., 2022](#)). Most of the information for secondary data research is done by analysing information from government websites, academic journals, and other reputable sources. However, since secondary data is not enough to answer a research question, primary research was also conducted, which involved collecting data by interviewing and asking questions about childcare leave by more than 100 working people. Interviews allowed researchers to gather in-depth information from participants about their experiences, opinions, and attitudes. Interviews were primarily unstructured and taken casually to avoid any fake responses and to capture honest attitudes from the respondents. The researcher has also used a thought experiment to analyse the consequences of government policies with long-term gender discrimination tendencies.

3. Discussion

In this section, we delve into the multifaceted strategies adopted by the Indian government to address and mitigate the persistent gender gap prevalent across various socio-economic spheres. Central to these efforts is an examination and critical evaluation, particularly through an economic lens, of the childcare leave policy instituted by the government of India. This policy, designed to facilitate the integration of women into the workforce while acknowledging their caregiving responsibilities, warrants a comprehensive analysis to assess its efficacy in fostering gender equality and its broader impact on the economy. By scrutinising the implications of this policy within the framework of economic principles, we aim to illuminate its strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for enhancement. Through this evaluation, we endeavour to contribute to the discourse surrounding gender equality initiatives in India. We offer insights to inform policy refinement and drive more inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development.

The first issue is on gender equality. It refers to women and girls having equal access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities and equal involvement in political and economic decision-making ([Rummery et al., 2021](#)). Although gender equality is a fundamental human right, there are still significant gaps in women's and girls' ability to fully engage in their communities and societies ([Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment \(CCSI\), UNDP, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network \(SDSN\), 2016](#)). As per the report of the United Nations, not only recognising women's rights to resources and property but also understanding the potential of women as a resource and achieving the allocative efficiency of such economic resources can not only help to address this issue of gender equality but also will have a positive effect on the welfare of the society as a whole ([Reanda, 1981](#)).

The gender gap refers to the differences between men and women regarding social, economic, and political opportunities and access to resources and services. The disparity exists between the sexes in various aspects of life, such as education, employment, income, health, and decision-making power. The gender gap meaning goes beyond just the numerical

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difference between men and women but also encompasses the systemic barriers that prevent women from achieving their full potential ([The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023](#)).

Studies have shown that culture plays a significant role in assigning work and affecting performance between men and women. The gender gap in mathematics results from our society's role in discriminating between boys and girls ([Entwisle et al., 1994](#)). It proves that culture has a more profound role in training only girls for child rearing, not boys. Male and female mathematical achievement is roughly equal in elementary school, beginning around grade seven. Girls' math performance declines relative to boys'. Girls' lack of higher-level math skills may preclude them from pursuing careers in science, engineering, and other math-related fields, so the gender gap has serious repercussions. Males and females earn more in math-related areas than in different fields, and income is meagre in non-mathematics fields.

Therefore, the point of discussion of this paper is not limited to closing gender gaps in the workplace but also to closing gender gaps from the mindset of the people. So boys are also trained well to care for the children, and girls are trained well to be breadwinners. Until the attitude towards understanding a woman as a different creature from men and is meant to do specific jobs is not changing, we will never be able to close gender-gap naturally in the workplace and society. This patriarchal attitude is not only creating refraction on a gender-biased culture but also affecting the economic efficiency of the economy.

Specifically, this study applies the economic lens to analyse the issue of supporting motherhood. Economics aims to study how rational individuals maximise their utility with given resources. If individuals are rational and information is perfect, resources gravitate toward their most valuable usage if set free. In other words, with perfect rationality, the market mechanism achieves equilibrium without government intervention. Irrationality or bounded rationality increases the transaction cost and can restrict mutually beneficial trade ([Conlisk, 1996](#)). Economic efficiency is a term used to describe the use of resources to maximise the production of goods and services from given inputs ([González & Miles-Touya, 2012](#)). The economy achieves efficiency when it produces the maximum output with the minimum inputs. It has static and dynamic aspects. The static element has an allocative and productive efficiency, whereas the dynamic results from a more liberal and competitive market with perfect rationality ([Clark, 1955](#)).

Allocative efficiency occurs when resources are allocated to their most valuable uses. Allocative efficiency requires allocating resources to produce goods and services that generate the highest economic return ([Vitkova et al., 2023](#)). Productive efficiency is when an economy has the maximum output with minimum inputs. Achieving productive efficiency requires that resources are used most efficiently, such as using the latest technology, minimising waste, and making the most efficient use of factors of production like labour and capital. This leads to a productive economy that allows for more significant economic growth and the production of goods and services that consumers value. On the other hand, dynamic efficiency results from competition and the free market. It is affected by resource utilisation, research and development, investment in human and non-human capital, and technological change. It occurs when the innovation rate catches momentum, achieving economies of scale.

Then, what is motherhood? Motherhood has been around since the dawn of humanity. It's a role that has been celebrated and vilified throughout the ages. In most cultures, a mother's "job" consists of various manual and managerial duties, but her "training" begins when she is still a child. In addition to conceiving and raising children, responsibilities include actively supporting children's health and schooling. Mothers play a significant part in the child's social and psychological growth ([Kuipers et al., 2021](#)).



As per the famous feminist Nancy Chodorow, mothering is not just biologically predetermined but is created and reinforced through cultural norms and expectations ([Barnett, 1998](#)). In other words, mothering or motherhood is based on the idea that it is not simply a product of biology but rather an idea perpetuated through social-structurally induced psychological mechanisms. Girls are taught that having a family is their ultimate goal from a young age, so they are encouraged to marry and have children. This leaves women feeling as though their lives and identities are defined by their primary roles as mothers.

This shift from nature to culture has limited the freedoms and liberties of women and made them unable to think rationally and be equal individuals. Cultural motherhood restricts a woman's and society's rationality, leading to economic inefficiency or misallocation of resources ([Wuestenenk & Begall, 2022](#)). Cultural motherhood, therefore, has also contributed to gender inequality, as women are often expected to take on the bulk of the responsibilities associated with raising a family.

3.1 Government Policies in Supporting Motherhood

The social structures and psychological mechanisms that increase gender gaps must be addressed and changed to ensure women can access the resources, education, and opportunities they need to become equal and free individuals. This section critically evaluates some government policies supporting motherhood to promote gender equality.

3.1.1 Maternity and Paternity Benefits

According to India's Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act of 2017, women in India are entitled to 26 weeks of maternity leave. This is an improvement from the previous 12 weeks of maternity leave. However, it still falls short of the international standard of the International Labour Organization (ILO) of 14 weeks of maternity leave. On the other hand, paternity leave is not mandated by law in India. Some companies offer paternity leave, usually for a maximum of two weeks. This disadvantages women and men both, as men are not given enough time to support their partners during the critical postpartum period ([Government of India, 2017](#)).

Moreover, the absence of paternity leave reinforces the traditional gender roles where women are expected to be the primary caregiver, while men are expected to be the breadwinner ([Boring & Moroni, 2023](#)). Therefore, it's a known fact that the lack of adequate maternity leave, coupled with the absence of paternity leave, puts women at a disadvantage in their careers and jeopardises the well-being of their families ([Duffy et al., 2020](#)). Women who take a break from their jobs to have a child often find it challenging to return to the workforce. They may have to start at a lower pay scale or be unable to find a job that matches their skills and qualifications ([Nichols, 2017](#)). This leads to a loss of talent and potential in the workforce, which is detrimental to the country's economic growth.

3.1.2 Childcare Facilities

Across the globe, childcare remains a critical economic barrier to working women because of the dependence on unpaid labour to care for children. The government has made some arrangements to reduce childcare as a barrier to mothers' participation in the workforce. India's 2017 Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act has a provision to address childcare in the workplace. The mandate requires that employers with 50 or more employees at a worksite provide a workplace crèche solution ([IFC, 2018](#)). The National Minimum Guidelines for Setting Up and Running Crèches under Maternity Benefit Act 2017 have been set forth to provide a safe and healthy environment for children of working mothers in India. The guidelines include provisions for the staffing, facilities, safety, hygiene, nutrition, and medical care of the children in the crèches. Crèches under Maternity Benefits are designed to ensure that working mothers in India have a safe and healthy environment for their children. The guidelines provide clear



and comprehensive provisions essential for the children's well-being in the crèche ([Government of India, 2018](#)). According to a survey done by NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Companies) in 2018, there are many loopholes in the mandate, which make the provision of creche facility as just compliance rather than willingness. Therefore only 49% of the total firms surveyed in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore have implemented the mandate (Times Of India, 2019).

3.1.3 Gender Budgeting

Gender budgeting is another effective and emerging tool various countries use to support and promote a gender-neutral society. Gender budgeting, or more precisely Gender Responsive Budgeting, is the product of the 20th century when politicians and economists realised that budgeting could address the issue of gender inequality in society ([Mishra & Sinha, 2012](#)). Mostly, it is misunderstood as a budget allocated toward the upliftment and empowerment of women. Gender budgeting identifies the budget's impact on different genders and its equality and inequality. Gender budgeting is a workout that uses a gender lens to scan through the public funds and find pros and cons related to allocating public funds. It is more towards gender sensitisation; it takes the government's policies and sets the budget for that policy to avoid any future discrimination or to strengthen the patriarchal society. Observing India's union budgets from 2015 to 2022, it has been almost 15 years, but the gender budget percentage is hovering around 5 to 6 percent of the total GDP. This trend depicts that gender budgeting in India is still superficial, and the government does not have much to make politicians aware enough to sensitise gender budgeting (India Budgets 2005 -22).

3.1.4 Childcare Leave Policy

The main focus of this paper is to evaluate India's current childcare leave (CCL) policy from an economic lens. As per the seventh pay commission, only female government employees assigned to Civil Services and positions related to Union affairs are eligible for CCL under Rule 43-C of the Central Civil Services (Leave) Rules, 1972, for a maximum of seven hundred and thirty days during the entire service, for caring for two eldest surviving children up to the age of eighteen years. There is no age limit for disabled children. There is no provision for fathers to take childcare leave if they do not want to leave their jobs and sit at home due to their essential role in an organisation. Fathers or male employees can take childcare leave only if they are widowers, single parents, or divorcees ([Government of India, 2019](#)). In a written response to a question in the Rajya Sabha, the Minister of Personnel, Public Grievances, and Pensions, Shri.V.Narayanasamy, stated that there is no plan for the government to provide Parent Care Leave on the lines of CCL. It is available to female Central Government employees intending to increase female involvement in government service ([Government of India, 2013](#)).

While the government has taken some steps to support new mothers, the current policies seem to be failing women in the country. The policy stipulates that female employees are eligible for childcare leaves, while male employees can only avail of such leaves in the event of their wives' death. The childcare policies of the government can not only lead to a situation where the mother is taking on responsibilities that could be better handled by someone else in the household but also corroborate the cultural role of women in mothering. On the one hand, it leads to inefficient use of resources, and on the other, it creates gender inequality in society's mindset. The following section discusses the economic consequences of CCL (childcare leaves), which are only meant for women.

3.2 Economic Consequences of Cultural Motherhood

Motherhood, especially the one imposed by society, i.e., cultural motherhood, may misallocate economic resources. There are economic consequences of motherhood in demand



by society. Most mothers spend more time and energy over and above the physical requirement of their children than other parents. In that case, she foregoes other activities, such as working an outside job, which could generate additional income. This means that the mother's resources, such as her time and energy, are allocated to child-rearing rather than to activities in which she might be more productive or has a comparative advantage that could generate a surplus for the family and economy. This type of overallocation of mothers' resources on childcare leads to inefficient use of economic resources.

Figure 1: Cost and Benefit of Motherhood

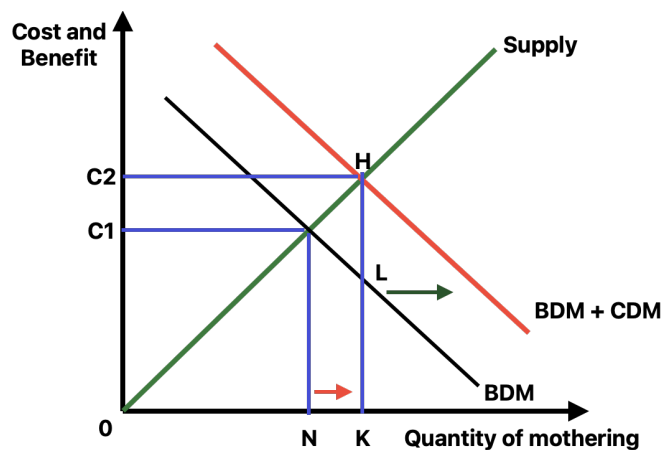


Figure 1 depicts the cost and benefits of mothering or motherhood. The cost and benefit of mothering are measured on the Y axis, and the X axis, the quantity of motherhood in terms of time spent on child-rearing activities is measured. BDM is the biological demand for motherhood, and CDM is the cultural demand for motherhood. If motherhood is just the child's biological need, the optimum amount would be ON, where the supply of mothering meets the BDM. Due to imposed cultural demand, the overall demand for mothering would be the red curve, and the quantity of mothering would be OK, over and above the optimum biological demand. This extra NK quantity of mothering can be shared between both parents if CCL is given to both parents and, therefore, can reduce the cost of mothering below C₂.

3.2.1 Short-term Economic Cost of Child-Rearing Activities: A Thought Experiment

We use a thought experiment to explain the economic cost of child-rearing activities over and above biological motherhood. The following are the assumptions to run the experiment.

Assumptions

- 1) Parents have only two activities: Child-rearing and contributing to economic production, and face trade-offs between these activities.
- 2) Child-rearing activity exceeds the infant's biological need of a mother. In other words, a child is more than 12 months of age. This also means both parents are equally good at caring for the child after 12 months.
- 3) Mother has a comparative advantage in economic production compared to father.
- 4) Childcare leave is not provided by the organization they are working for.



Table 1: With the imposition of Cultural motherhood

Parents	Child-rearing activity (days)	Economic activity (days)	Productive capacity (\$/day)	Annual production (\$)
Mother	90 days	275 days	\$ 10	\$ 2750
Father	0	365 days	\$ 8	\$ 2920
Total	90 days	640 days	-	\$ 5670

Table 2: Without the imposition of Cultural motherhood

Parents	Child-rearing activity (days)	Economic activity (days)	Productive capacity (\$/day)	Annual production (\$/day)
Mother	0 days	365 days	\$ 10	\$ 3650
Father	90	275 days	\$ 8	\$ 2200
Total	90 days	640 days	-	\$ 5850

With this thought experiment, we have seen how cultural motherhood, which is imposed by society and is extended from biological mothering, as Nancy Chodorow mentions, may have higher opportunity costs if the mother is more productive at the workplace than the father. We can see in table 1 is about a situation where cultural motherhood is induced in a woman. Therefore, despite being the more productive member of the family, she takes childcare leave of ninety days with provisions of CCL or without pay. The total production is just \$5670, a total output of 640 days, with the father working for 365 days and the mother working for only 275 days.

Compared to this, had there been no pressure from society (family and government) on a woman to take childcare leave, the economic production would have increased to \$5850, while the mother is working for 365 days and the father is taking childcare leave working for 275 days. Even if we assume that the organisation provides paid childcare leave, economic activity's production loss remains the same.

3.2.2 Long-Term Socio-Economic Consequences of Child-Rearing Activities: Vicious Circle of Gender-Gap

The childcare leaves policy not only brings short-term economic consequences but can also be detrimental to long-term socio-economic status ([Kurzman et al., 2019](#)). This policy fails to recognise that men must be equally involved in raising their children and can be a better option from an efficiency point of if the mother has a comparative advantage in working over the father. In addition, the policy also ignores the fact that not all women have access to resources to take childcare leave. This is particularly problematic in a country like India, where many women are still economically dependent on their husbands and thus unable to take advantage of such a policy. Though the childcare leaves of India look very promising in promoting gender equality in the workplace, upon review of the childcare leave provisions from a gender-sensitive lens, it appears to be more of a gender-biased policy toward males.

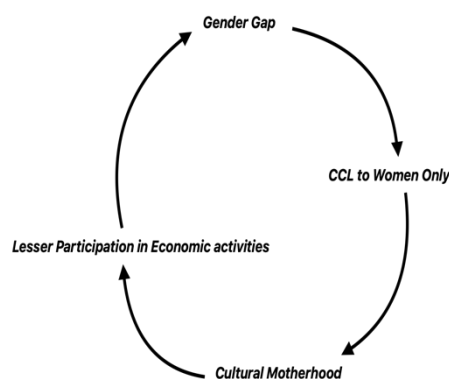


Culture plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities. The math gender gap is the best example of the same (Nollenberger et al., 2016). For many men and women interviewed, the Childcare leave policy appears to be very attractive, primarily benefiting female employees to promote women's empowerment and reduce the gender gap. At the same time, most people express their opinion that childcare is the mothers' job only, which is why it is not provided to fathers. Only some interviewees, including educated mothers, believed that since females are well-trained, they can care for their child more than males. They also opine that fathers may not support the growth and development of a child as a mother can. Only a few understood it as a problem as it creates a gender gap and divides the work of a girl and a boy as a caregiver and bread earner, respectively, in the family.

The research observation on childcare involving women and men highlights how the government's policy corroborates society's mindset and demand for cultural motherhood. The birth givers are expected to take on most childcare responsibilities, even if they have other commitments such as work or personal pursuits. The childcare leaves in India perpetuate a culture where motherhood is viewed as the primary job for women, with little regard for equal distribution of responsibilities. The long-term economic effect of this childcare policy will be that society would sustain the social structures and psychological mechanisms. The mechanisms that shape only girls for mothering or motherhood and not boys or both of them equally.

This is demonstrated well in the article from American progress. The author has observed a direct correlation between childbirth, childcare, and the attrition rate of female employees quitting their job. Women in India have some of the lowest labor force participation rates globally, at only 21 percent in 2018 (Afridi et al., 2016). This may be because childbirth and childcare responsibilities are often cited as the main reasons female employees quit their job in India (Jayachandran, 2021). Thus we see a vicious circle of gender inequality with the 'only for women' childcare policy. Childcare leaves indirectly support the patriarchal structure that prevents women from accessing resources, limits their access to education and opportunities, and restricts their ability to participate in decision-making compared to men.

Figure 2: Vicious Circle of Gender Gap



Therefore, policymakers must challenge such beliefs and promote a more equitable approach to childcare that benefits parents and children, promoting women's empowerment and economic growth and development (Duflo, 2012).

India's childcare leave policies need to be revised compared to other countries. Several countries have successfully implemented family-friendly and gender-equal childcare leave policies. Countries like Sweden, Norway, and Iceland offer better leave options, which both parents can share. This ensures that parents can support their children from birth until age 12.



Moreover, these countries have a strong network of childcare facilities that are affordable and accessible to all. In Norway, parental leave is paid at full salary for the first 44 weeks or at 80% if parents choose to take 54 weeks. Fathers must take at least six weeks of parental leave or risk losing payments simultaneously to encourage both parents to participate ([World Economic Forum, 2019](#)).

4. Conclusion

Motherhood, while often rewarding, can lead to economic inefficiencies and perpetuate gender inequality if not addressed through policy reform. The Indian government's childcare leave policy, which predominantly favours and reinforces traditional gender roles, fails to acknowledge the contributions of both parents in child-rearing and the economic realities many women face. To rectify this, there is a pressing need for a gender-sensitive childcare leave policy that supports both parents during the postpartum period and beyond. Such policy reform must transcend traditional gender roles by offering comprehensive maternity and paternity leave options, as well as childcare leave, to promote shared responsibility and long-term gender parity. This should be complemented by flexible work arrangements and accessible childcare services, supported by government intervention to incentivise corporate investment in childcare facilities. By addressing these multifaceted dimensions, childcare policies can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality, fostering economic growth, and enhancing social welfare.

In addition to promoting shared parental responsibility, gender-sensitive childcare policies should address the economic costs associated with prolonged absence from the workforce by offering training and development opportunities. Employers must also embrace flexible work arrangements to support mothers and fathers in balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. By doing so, India can work towards achieving goals such as equal pay for equal work, the elimination of violence against women, harmonious work-life balance for working women, equal representation of women in economic activities, and investment in a future that favours both women and men. Therefore, urgent revisions to India's childcare leave policy are essential to ensure gender equality, economic efficiency, and social progress.

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