

Gender bias in the UN

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The United Nations may be the leading advocate for equality and human rights, but it falls short in ensuring the rights of its own staff. When examining the parental leave policies set forth by the UN Secretariat, it is evident that there is a definitive presence of gender bias. Gender bias language and policies that accommodate only those families who follow a traditional structure means that the essential needs of non-traditional families are not met. In a world where family structures are becoming more diverse and less binary, is it not crucial that workplace policies are adapted in tandem?

The UN Secretariat is the front runner of such policies in the whole UN common system, and it is therefore not surprising that the absence of gender-neutral language is common throughout the policies of the United Nations and its agencies.

Categorizing maternity and parental leave on the basis of gender by providing sixteen weeks of leave to the natural mother but only four to the father, reinforces the notion that it is the responsibility of the mother to care for the child, and that the father is only the secondary care provider. Fathers are thus prevented from having a reasonable amount of time to bond with the child, and the traditional gender roles are perpetuated.

In situations of adoption, mothers and fathers are both limited to eight weeks of parental leave. While some organizations such as UNAIDS, UNESCO, and WHO have already modernized parental leave by offering the same amount of time for adoption as for natural births, there are still many organizations that discriminate against adoptive parents. Although mothers take leave to recover from the physical toll of pregnancy, the parental leave is also needed to establish a connection with the child. Adopted children who often come from very traumatic situations should not be treated any differently than other children by having less bonding time with their new family.

While this bias negatively impacts heterosexual couples and reinforces stereotypical bias, the major impact is on homosexual families where, by gender

semantics, both parents have to fulfill the role of the primary or secondary care provider. As current language asserts, only women can be the primary, and only men the secondary. A male same-sex couple will in total be given less leave than a traditional or female same-sex couple, although one of them will actually and naturally be the primary care giver. By structuring parental leave on a traditional family structure, the notion of a patriarchal heteronormative society is reinforced.

UN Globe suggests that “the guiding principles of parental leave policy should be equality, fairness, and non-discrimination” and that the interests of the child should always be placed first. This would seem like common sense, but despite efforts made by a few organizations, overall the majority of policy neglects to ensure that equal opportunity is provided to all employees in the event of raising a child.

To be more inclusive, the United Nations and its agencies need to implement parental leave policies that are categorized on the basis of “primary care” and “secondary care” provider. By determining parental leave in a gender-neutral manner, the needs of diverse family structures are better accommodated for and respected. Organizations such as Bioversity have already incorporated this into their policy, eliminating all categorizations based on gender.

In doing so, gender equality between staff would also improve, and stereotypical relations and actions would be reduced. It could for instance mean that more men would request flexible working hours to take care of their children, breaking the stigma related to this. It would also help eliminate gender conflicts, parental leave complications, and the likelihood of discrimination lawsuits. By allowing parents to determine who will fulfill the role of primary care provider, the potential burdens of childcare are decreased. When parental leave is fair and flexible, the most important goal is reachable: ensuring the best interest of the child.

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