

# *Men Say They Want Paid Leave but Then Don't Use All of It. What Stops Them?*

When balancing work and family becomes difficult, women tend to resort to caregiving and men to earning money.



By **Claire Cain Miller**

Dec. 4, 2019



A new report says men feel freer to take leave when company leaders do. As a supporter of family leave, Alexis Ohanian, co-founder of Reddit and husband of Serena Williams, took time off to care for their daughter, Olympia. Paul Kane/Getty Images

Men today are as likely as women to say they need to have time off work to care for babies, aging parents or sick family members, new data show. Yet men are much less likely than women to actually take leave if it's not paid — and even if it is paid, they take much shorter leaves than women do.

This is true even though many men say they want to share caregiving responsibilities equally, and despite the fact that they are more likely than women to have access to

paid leave.

Two new reports on men's use of family leave show that for men, there's a gulf between their desires and their reality. Just as women have for decades, men are finding it hard to balance career and family in the ways they want.

When the difficulties come to a head, both men and women tend to resort to traditional roles, even if it's not what they'd planned or hoped to do: Women take a step back at work to prioritize family needs, and men do less at home to prioritize work.

"Women will take unpaid leave for caregiving because they have no other choice," said Brigid Schulte, director of the Better Life Lab at New America and an author of one of the reports. Men, despite having better benefits and more choice, "don't feel they can make that choice as often as they say they want or need to," she said.

The New America report, released Wednesday, found no gender differences in the need to take leave. A third of working adults said they expected to need it to care for a baby, and half expected to need it to care for old, sick or disabled family members. The data came from a nationally representative survey of 2,966 Americans by NORC at the University of Chicago.

It found that men were only slightly less likely than women to have taken leave, but when they did, their leaves were shorter.

A narrower survey by the Boston College Center for Work and Family — of 1,240 white-collar workers at four companies that offer gender-neutral paid leave — also found widespread support for leave. Yet it found that women were much more likely than men to take the full amount of leave offered by their companies, which was between six and 16 weeks.

Even though men say they want family leave, something is stopping them from taking full advantage of it.

The biggest hurdle seems to be financial. In the New America survey, 87 percent of respondents said not being able to afford to take leave was a reason that men didn't take it. The United States guarantees only unpaid leave, and not for all workers. The

states that offer paid leave generally replace only part of people's wages, and while more companies now offer paid leave, most workers don't have it, especially low earners.

But the reasons men don't take as much leave are not just financial. The survey found that men were more likely than women to be in the full-time, high-earning jobs that provide paid leave, and also more likely to receive full pay instead of partial pay while they were on leave. Yet they were still less likely to take it.

Women were significantly more likely than men to take unpaid leave when needed, 40 percent versus 28 percent.

A large reason, social scientists have found, is that traditional gender role expectations — that men are responsible for financially supporting families, and women for caring for them — are hard to overcome.

“Part of it is a low level of acceptance of fathers saying, ‘I’ve got caregiving responsibilities,’” said Brad Harrington, executive director of the Boston College Center for Work and Family. “It’s internal, societal, how they’re raised.”

Just over half of men in the New America survey — and a slightly higher share of women — said a reason men didn't take leave was that caregiving wasn't manly. Older men were less likely to say this, perhaps because they've had more experience caring for elders or other family members, the researchers said.

Nearly half of women said men didn't take it because they assumed their partners or families would do the caregiving (only a third of men said that was a reason). Eighty-four percent of respondents said men's decisions were affected by their family's expectations about whether they should take caregiving leave.

Men also receive subtle messages about what's expected of them at work. Whether senior male leaders take leave, whether managers encourage it, and whether colleagues are penalized for it all guide men's behavior, according to the report, which included findings from five online focus groups.

Two-thirds of survey respondents said support from managers was a reason men take leave, and 61 percent said a lack of visible penalties for co-workers who took it

was another reason.

“Soft barriers came up a lot: guilt and shame for not taking leave, and also guilt and shame for not wanting to leave co-workers in a lurch,” said Ms. Schulte, who wrote the report with Amanda Lenhart and Haley Swenson at New America. “You just got a sense that men feel trapped, not having the infrastructure to take it but also trapped in the role of breadwinners.”

The consequences when women take more leave are long term. Women end up doing more of the caregiving later on, too, and this unequal division of labor drives the gender pay gap and stalls women’s career advancement

Both of the new reports conclude that to combat gender inequality, it’s not enough for men and women to change their behavior. Bigger, structural changes are needed

Offering paternity leave — paid, so men will take it — is a starting point, the reports said. Making full-length paternity leave the default — requiring men to opt out — has also proved effective. So has putting in systems to fill in for workers on leave, so they know it’s acceptable.

Workplaces could also change the way they talk about fathers, the researchers said. Senior men could discuss their caregiving responsibilities, and fathers could be included in parenting groups and offered flexible work schedules alongside mothers

The message for employers, and for society more broadly, Mr. Harrington said, is: “Get your mind around when men have kids, that’s a significant change in their life, not just when women do.”