



Equality through the ages: Parental leave



Introduction

Parental leave, that is time away from the workplace associated with the birth of an infant and includes maternity, paternity and shared leave entitlement. However, formal definitions vary by jurisdiction and have evolved over time (Moss & Deven, 1999). Leave can be both paid and unpaid.

Equality

Historically, men and women have been expected to conform to traditional gender roles (Wright, 2014). Within these roles individuals were treated differently due to gendered norms and assumptions. For example, in the UK prior to the gradual removal of the marriage bar, women were expected to leave work upon marriage/pregnancy to assume home-based duties and childcare, supporting men as breadwinners (Briar, 1997). Indeed, the initial policy shift towards greater equality in the workplace was as late as the 1970's. Equality when defined in terms of the same or no less favourable treatment for all individuals was not a clear policy priority until the (EU-led) legislative overhaul of the Equality Acts 2006 and 2010.

Progress through the ages...

In order to understand why parental leave has a significant policy impact affecting many areas beyond it's own policy frame, it is useful to look back at historical attitudes and the development of leave provision. *Figure 1*. Parental leave timeline illustrates how far the UK has progressed since 1900. A number of incremental attitude shifts have been required along the road towards greater equality (Smith, 2014).

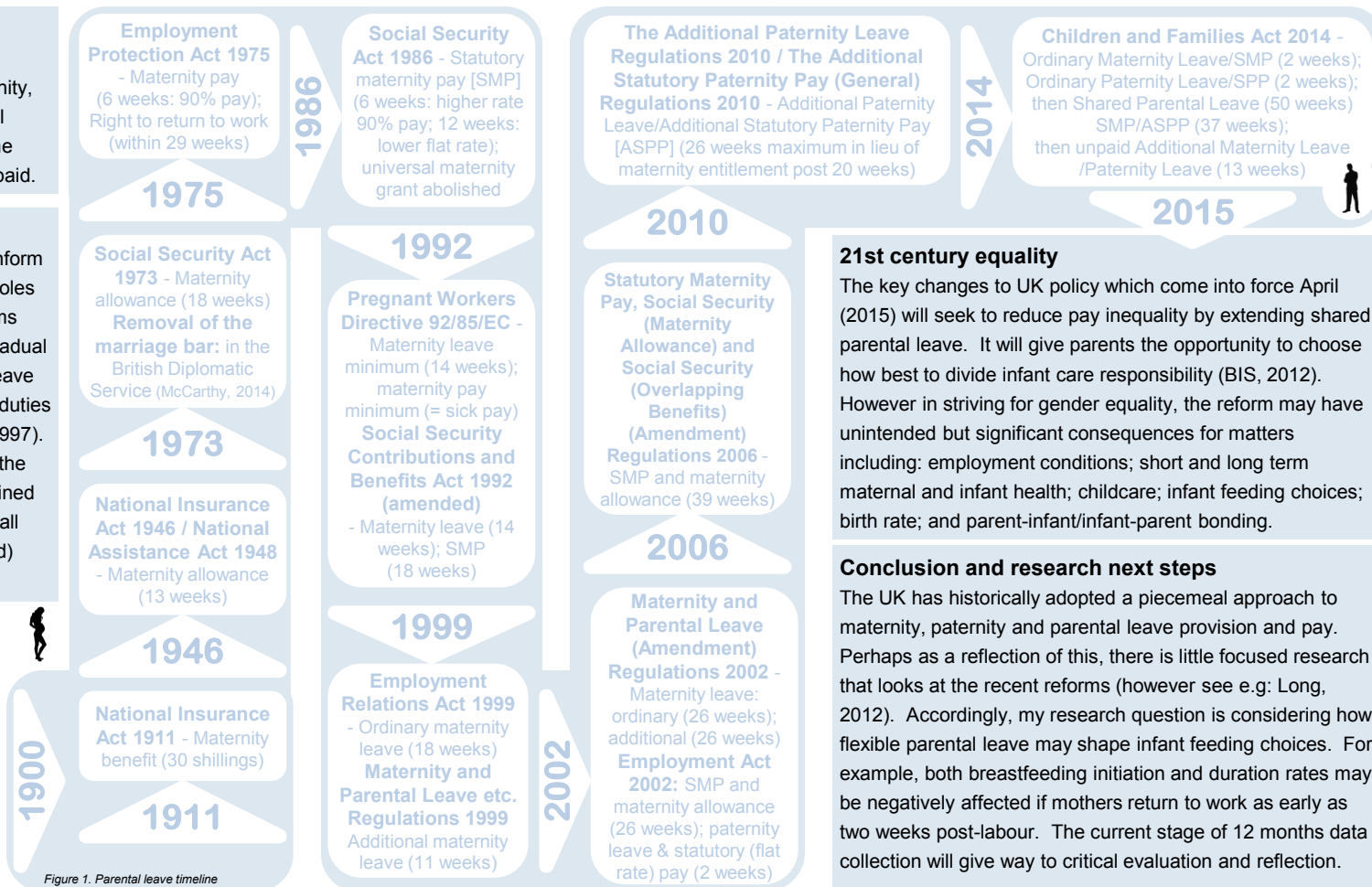


Figure 1. Parental leave timeline

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