

# PARENTAL LEAVE AND BEYOND

Recent developments, current  
issues, future directions

Edited by

Peter Moss, Ann-Zofie Duvander  
and Alison Koslowski



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## FIVE

# Israel: Leave policy, familialism and the neoliberal welfare state

*Nadav Perez-Vaisvidovsky*

## Introduction

Several researchers in the field of family policy have noted the rapid changes in policy toward families in almost all welfare states in recent decades, adapting it to new family and employment patterns (see for example Kamerman and Moss, 2009; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015; Naldini and Long, 2017). Israel, however, remains an outlier. Although Israeli family and, most notably, employment patterns have thoroughly changed, no less than elsewhere, family policy in general and leave policy specifically have undergone only minor changes. This chapter will examine the changes (and failed attempts to change) in leave policy in Israel between 2007 (when the provision of leave was the same as in 1954) and 2017, and which culminated in a large-scale public protest, in order to understand why the rapid and massive changes in employment and familial patterns were not matched by changes in leave policy.

The chapter begins by providing, in broad brush strokes, some background on relevant features of Israeli society, before describing family policy in Israel in general and the evolution of leave policy in the years 1954–2007 as an element of this broader policy. Next, the chapter outlines three changes in leave policy that occurred between 2007 and 2016, leading to an analysis of the process of change in 2016–2017, which began with a Facebook protest and ended (for the time being, at least) in a policy change in March 2017.

A final point needs to be made about the scope of this chapter. Its focus is Israeli leave policy, which, in broad terms, covers the area held by Israel prior to 1967, plus inhabitants of eastern Jerusalem and the Golan Heights and Jewish inhabitants in the West Bank. Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza strip have access to the leave policy of the Palestinian Authority, which is independent of the Israeli programme and is not included in this chapter.

## 1 **Characteristics of Israeli society**

2  
3 Several characteristics of Israeli society are essential to understanding  
4 the development of its leave policy: familialism, increasing participation  
5 by women in the labour market, and the society's heterogeneity. Other  
6 relevant characteristics of Israeli society, in particular the effects of the  
7 Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the neoliberalisation of Israeli economic  
8 and social policy, will be touched on in the course of the chapter.

9 The most prominent characteristic of Israeli society, when discussing  
10 family policy, is familialism, the great importance attached to the  
11 family over the needs of individual members: the family is central.  
12 Israeli families are large. The total fertility rate (TFR) in Israel in  
13 2015 was 3.1 – not only the highest in the OECD, but almost double  
14 the OECD average of 1.7, and 40 per cent more than Mexico's, the  
15 second-highest.<sup>1</sup> Other indicators confirm the centrality of the Israeli  
16 family, albeit less dramatically: the marriage rate is among the highest  
17 in the OECD, and marriage age among the lowest; divorce rates are  
18 below-average (although rising in recent years), as are rates of single  
19 parent families.<sup>2</sup>

20 From these data, it is easy to imagine that Israeli society promotes  
21 traditional caring roles for mothers. However, Israel also has high rates  
22 of employment for women, and specifically among mothers. Maternal  
23 employment in Israel in 2014 was 72.1 per cent, well above the OECD  
24 average of 66.2 per cent, and it varies little by age of youngest child.  
25 Women in Israel not only work outside the home – they work long  
26 hours; 60.2 per cent of women work more than 40 hours per week,  
27 and the average annual working hours for women are 1,700, well  
28 above the OECD average of 1,500. However, although Israeli women  
29 work more than their average OECD counterparts, they work much  
30 less than Israeli men, who average almost 2,000 annual hours worked  
31 (OECD, 2017). Thus, the picture that emerges is that parents, and  
32 specifically women, face a double burden: on the one hand, large  
33 families (which demand large amounts of care work); on the other,  
34 long hours of work in the labour market.

35 The aggregate statistics presented above, however, miss an  
36 important part of the story: heterogeneity. Israeli society is deeply  
37 divided: Jews and Palestinians; religion and level of religiosity; native-  
38 born and immigrants. These divisions are clearly revealed in family  
39 characteristics. Ultra-orthodox Jewish families and Muslim Palestinian

40  
41 <sup>1</sup> <https://data.oecd.org/pop/fertility-rates.htm>

42 <sup>2</sup> [www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm](http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm)

families in general have more conservative family structures and higher birth rates (TFR of 6.53 and 3.62, respectively), with lower participation by women in the labour market. Secular Jewish and Christian Palestinian families are at the opposite end of the spectrum, with comparatively small families (although still large by European standards), and high levels of employment (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002; Hleihel, 2011; Okun, 2013).

The differences in family size and structure deeply affect the discourse on family policy – and through it, family policy itself. The high rates of low-income families with large numbers of children among certain groups create antagonism toward programmes that target these populations – specifically, means-tested social security programmes aimed at children or families. Such programmes (and specifically child allowance and income maintenance) were at the centre of the debate in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and experienced deep cuts (Doron, 2010). This heterogeneity had little impact on leave policy, aimed as it is at women (and men) participating in the labour market, and the Israeli programme stresses this aspect; it escaped the critique aimed at other programmes.

## **An overview of family policy in Israel**

Family policy in Israel is, naturally, influenced by these characteristics of Israeli families. Another important factor – the most important, some claim – is the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In the decade following the formation of the Israeli state in 1948, family policy in Israel was formed in the light of this conflict. The governing ethos in Israeli society expressed commitment to gender equality, for example in the Israeli declaration of independence. However, actual policy focused on the role of women as ‘mothers of the nation’, and their vital part in the ‘demographic battle’ to maintain a Jewish majority in the state of Israel. Palestinian citizens, having voting rights for the Israeli Parliament, were construed as a threat to the existence of a Zionist–Jewish state. Maintaining the Judaism of the state was dependent, then, on the maintenance of a sizeable Jewish majority, which in turn depended on high birth rates (alongside immigration). Motherhood was seen as a weapon in a demographic battle for the identity of the newly founded nation.

In this context, equal rights legislation was enacted only when it was perceived not to be detrimental to the role of women as mothers. For example, equal military service for women, one of the hallmarks of perceived gender equality, was required only from unmarried young

1 women with no children, and the main legislation for gender equality  
2 at the time – the 1951 Women’s Equal Rights Law – was limited to  
3 areas not affecting the stability of family or marriage. Furthermore,  
4 equality was understood as ‘the equal right to contribute to nation  
5 building’ (as the military service example shows). Equality in its  
6 contemporary feminist meaning did not appear in the discourse until  
7 much later (Berkovitch, 1997).

8 Israeli society has undergone major changes since then, but this  
9 tension between gender equality and the role of women as mothers  
10 still shapes family policy. Although Israeli women’s participation in  
11 waged work has risen dramatically (Hacker et al, 2011), ‘women’s  
12 policy’ and ‘family policy’ is still aimed primarily at protecting mothers  
13 participating in the workforce. Women, therefore, are understood  
14 mainly as mothers, their roles as workers and citizens taking second  
15 place (Ajzenstadt and Gal, 2001; Perez, 2010; Helman, 2011; Herbst  
16 and Benjamin, 2012; Herbst, 2013).

17 One of the major changes, affecting both the Israeli economy and  
18 the welfare state, is a sharp move towards neoliberalism. Israel originally  
19 had distinct characteristics of a social democratic welfare regime. But  
20 since the 1980s, the country has moved toward a neoliberal regime, in  
21 a way that appears extreme even compared to a similar shift occurring  
22 in western welfare states (Doron, 2001; Hacker et al, 2011).

23 Renan Barzilay (2012) describes the combined effect of these two  
24 processes on family policy as ‘fire and forget’. The state supports  
25 childbearing – but only until the child is born. Afterwards, parents  
26 are left to care for their children with little state support. Thus, public  
27 funding for fertility treatments in Israel is the most generous in the  
28 world; protections for pregnant workers, including protection from  
29 layoff and the provision of leave during pregnancy complications, are  
30 comprehensive. However, state assistance and protection for families  
31 with children are minimal. It was only during the decade described  
32 in more detail below (2007–2017) that free education for three- to  
33 five-year-olds was introduced; before then, daycare for parents was  
34 subsidised only on a limited scale for low-income families. As discussed,  
35 the working week is long (43 hours), and regulation of working hours  
36 virtually non-existent. Leave policies, overall, are modest.

37 Perhaps the most striking example of the ‘forget’ side of the ‘fire  
38 and forget policy’ are child allowances and income maintenance for  
39 families in poverty. These experienced deep cuts in the early 2000s,  
40 the explicit logic behind which was that ‘some families have too many  
41 children’ (Doron, 2010, p.21). This brings Israel to the bottom of the  
42 league table when measuring government expenditure per child, on

early childhood education and care (OECD, 2017) and social security protection for families (OECD, 2017).

## Parental Leave before 2007

Prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Maternity Leave was eight weeks, based on the British Mandate colonial rule legislation. In 1954, a new Maternity Leave entitlement was introduced, as part of the National Insurance Act, which outlined the new state's social security programme, and the Women Labour Act, which defined protections for working women (and specifically, for working mothers). The new programme included a 12-week Maternity Leave, compensated at 75 per cent of earnings prior to birth. The leave was to be taken in one block of time and could be started from six weeks before birth. Leave payment was based on contributions to social insurance. The programme also included an unpaid leave of up to one year after birth for mothers, dependent on the period of employment with the same employer prior to birth. Both leaves were termed 'Hufshat Leida' (לידה חופשת), literally 'birth leave', and both included measures of employment protection, though the protection for the paid leave was stronger.

This leave was described at the time by the Minister of Labour, Golda Meirson (later Meir), as a major step towards the protection of women workers and toward gender equality, and as a recognition of the contribution of women to the Zionist struggle. It was also stressed that the leave complied with ILO and WHO recommendations, and was more generous than parallel programmes in "enlightened" countries such as Sweden and Switzerland' (170th meeting of the 2nd Knesset [Israeli Parliament], 29 December 1952).

Maternity Leave, as introduced in 1954, remained virtually unchanged for four decades, except for fathers being able to share the unpaid leave from 1988. Minor changes included expanding the right to adopting parents and to family members where the child or the mother were hospitalised during leave, and securing social benefits for mothers taking leave. Duration, eligibility criteria and payment, however, remained unchanged for the entire period.

The 1990s were a period of change in Israeli gender policy. A group of feminist legislators transformed gender-related policy in a number of fields, including work–family balance. Although Maternity Leave was not seen as a main target by these legislators, some changes were introduced. The two main ones were, first, in 1994 raising the level of compensation from 75 per cent of earnings prior to birth to 100 per

cent; and, in 1998, giving the option for mothers to transfer part of their paid leave to their spouse.<sup>3</sup> However, the length of leave, paid or unpaid, was unchanged, remaining at 12 weeks and one year, respectively.

Subsequently, members of the Knesset (MKs), mainly from opposition parties, continually proposed extensions to the paid Maternity leave. From 1992, in every elected Knesset, a bill to extend the leave to 14 or 16 weeks was laid on the Knesset's table – and in each and every case, it faced government opposition and failed to pass the first stage of the legislative process. Thus, although various changes to the leave were introduced, its length did not change.

### 2007–2016: small change in leave policy

In 2007, Israeli leave policy consisted of 12 weeks paid Maternity Leave – similar to the situation in 1954, except payment was now 100 per cent of earnings, though still dependent on contribution (that is, participation in the labour force) prior to birth. Out of 12 weeks, six could be transferred to the father (under certain conditions). In addition, an unpaid leave was available for one of the parents until the child reached one year of age. As the first 12 weeks of Maternity Leave are mandatory, take-up is universal by those who are eligible. In 2014 (latest available data), 69 per cent of women giving birth received compensation and 0.39 per cent of fathers shared their spouses' leave.

Other countries, however, had moved on. In the 1950s, 12 weeks of Maternity Leave was considered world-leading, but by 2007, it placed Israel at the bottom of international comparisons (Ray et al, 2008). Moreover, the 1990s and the 2000s witnessed major changes in almost all welfare states, both in the general field of family policy (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015) and specifically in the field of leave policy (Kamerman and Moss, 2009).

Many Israeli parents, then, faced a problematic situation in 2007. The changes described above in women's employment had already taken place for many groups in Israeli society, if not all. Coupled with Israeli familialism, and specifically high fertility rates, these placed a heavy burden on the shoulders of Israeli women, and the welfare state did little to help them cope with this situation. While the government

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<sup>3</sup> One may argue that this change constituted a transformation of Maternity Leave to Parental Leave. However, since both legislation and court ruling emphasise that the leave is an entitlement of the mother, who has an option to transfer it, 'Maternity Leave' still describes the programme better.



failed to act to lighten this burden, private legislators did attempt changes, some of which received governmental backing and passed.

### *2007: Maternity Leave extended from 12 to 14 weeks*

The election of the 17th Knesset in 2006 brought about conditions for change. Two MKs – Gideon Saar, from the right-wing Likud Party, and Shelly Yechimovich, from the left-wing Labour Party – introduced a bill to extend Maternity Leave to 14 weeks. As explained both in the Knesset and in interviews, they sought to close the gap between Israel and other industrialised countries and the standards set by international organisations such as the WHO, the ILO and the EU. They were also influenced by rising rates of female employment.

The extension from 12 to 14 weeks was seen as a first step towards a more comprehensive reform of leave policy. This is how MK Saar explained the bill in the Knesset:

[The extension] will allow Israel to stand in line with at least the minimalist norm, as it exists today even in the European directive of the International Labour Organization [sic]. We know that many studies stress the importance of the connection to the mother in the first months of the baby's life, including breastfeeding, when it exists. Other countries have gone much further. I admit that 14 weeks is not the final destination in my vision, but a realist move that I deemed achievable in this Knesset in the current circumstances.

While previous bills had met with fierce government opposition, this one fared differently. The attitude of the centre-left government was ambivalent. The initial response was support, conditioned by a gradual implementation programme. It then withdrew its support, but did not pressure its MKs to oppose the law, practically ensuring that it would pass the second stage of legislation. In the last stage, the government changed its position again and decided to support the bill, which passed and became law in May 2007, extending Maternity Leave in Israel for the first time in five decades.

Saar and Yechimovich submitted a second bill, a year after the first, to further extend Maternity Leave to 16 weeks, and putting forward the same reasoning. The government reaction was similar, conditioned support on the first stage, opposition on the second stage. Again, the bill passed against government opposition. However, before the third

1 and final stage of legislation, the government collapsed, a new Knesset  
2 was elected, and the bill was not passed.

3

#### 4 *2010: more leave, no extra compensation*

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6 Members of the next Knesset attempted to extend Maternity Leave,  
7 but using a different strategy. This time, the bill was promoted by  
8 MKs Tzipi Hotovely, from the right-wing Likud Party, and Dalia  
9 Itzik, from the centrist Kadima Party – again, a cooperation of  
10 opposition and coalition MKs. Their bill proposed that paid Maternity  
11 Leave be extended to 26 weeks, almost doubling its length, but the  
12 compensation for the leave would not change, remaining equal to  
13 14 weeks of the worker's pay prior to birth. The bill passed and  
14 became law in March 2010.

15 As noted before, however, Israeli parents were already eligible for  
16 one year's unpaid leave. Thus, the new bill practically created three  
17 distinct periods of leave: a paid leave of 14 weeks (hereafter 'paid  
18 leave'), an unpaid leave of 12 weeks ('first unpaid leave'), and another  
19 period of unpaid leave of 26 weeks ('second unpaid leave'), each under  
20 different conditions. To add to the confusion, all three periods were  
21 labelled 'Birth Leave'.

22 The effect of the legislation on the lives of parents was minimal.  
23 The main advantage was intended to be the universal availability of  
24 the first unpaid leave to all women, whereas the second unpaid leave  
25 was only available to those parents working with the same employer  
26 for 12 months. However, this was removed during the legislation  
27 to maintain government support, and the final bill had the same  
28 12 months requirement.

29 Thus, the differences between the two types of unpaid leave  
30 remained minimal, boiling down to the first unpaid leave being  
31 formally part of the paid leave, and therefore covered by its protections;  
32 these include an obligation on the employer to continue paying into  
33 pension funds, maintenance of seniority-related workers' rights, and  
34 somewhat stronger protection from layoff. In addition, because the  
35 formal leave was 26 weeks, mothers no longer had to inform their  
36 employer if they wanted to extend their leave, but only if they wanted  
37 to shorten their leave to 14 weeks. The legislators believed that this  
38 would strengthen the position of mothers vis-a-vis their employer  
39 when requesting an extension.

40 Why, then, was the extension needed? The reasoning provided by  
41 the legislators did not stress the immediate benefits of the legislation,  
42 but rather its value as a step towards a future expansion of leave. As

they realised that the government would not allow an extension of paid leave, they worked to extend the leave but not the pay – in the hope that a better political climate in the future would allow an extension not only of leave, but also the compensation period.

### *2016: Introducing Paternity Leave*

The last step in this decade-long period was the introduction of Paternity Leave. Before 2016, mothers in Israel could transfer part of their Maternity Leave to their spouse, but fathers enjoyed no independent entitlement to leave and had no option of taking leave at the same time as their spouse. The only option available was a short period, defined as sick leave, from the beginning of birth contractions until 24 hours after birth, during which fathers could be absent from their work.

Here also, the change came from private legislation. The first to propose a Paternity Leave bill was MK Uri Ariel, of the right-wing Bait Yehudi. His bill in 2011 offered seven days of leave for a newborn daughter and eight days for a newborn son (to allow the father to participate in the Jewish ceremony of circumcision, performed on the eighth day after birth). The leave was to be paid by the employer and deducted from the father's allotted sick leave. The bill's stated rationale was to 'enable parents to spend the first days with their family and to make it easier for the mother'. It enjoyed government support and passed the first and second stages. However, before the third and final stage, the Knesset dispersed for elections.

Following the appointment of MK Ariel as a government minister after the next elections, MK Tamar Zandberg, from the left-wing Meretz party, pushed the bill in the next Knesset. It again enjoyed government support, but due to opposition by the head of the relevant parliamentary committee, MK Haim Katz, who decried the importance of paternal involvement, it did not proceed.

After the next elections, in 2015, Zandberg continued to advance the bill, again with governmental support and this time with a sympathetic committee head. The bill went through a smooth and quick legislative process, and became law in July 2016. However, during the legislation the MKs had to make concessions in order to retain government support. The government, in turn, required the agreement of employer organisations. Thus, the length of the leave was shortened to five days, and the first three days came not from the father's sick allocation, but from his annual leave days. Here, again, the legislators stressed that this was only a partial solution, Zandberg

1 acknowledging that the new leave was insufficient. She expressed the  
2 hope that a more comprehensive Paternity Leave measure would soon  
3 follow, providing a longer period and public funding of payment for  
4 the leave.

## 6 **Public protests and leave change**

8 The changes described above originated in the legislature. The  
9 MKs proposing them claimed that their bills were based on citizens'  
10 demands, and answered societal needs. But they were not the result of  
11 actual demands from a social movement or civil society activism. This  
12 situation, however, had drastically changed by the second half of 2016.

13 To understand this change, it is necessary to return to the worldwide  
14 waves of social protest of 2011 (for example, the Occupy Movement,  
15 the Arab Spring), which did not bypass Israel (Glasius and Pleyers,  
16 2013). In July 2011, an unprecedented wave of protest washed over Israel,  
17 including demonstrations, tent cities in city centres, massive social  
18 media activity and more. The protests were socio-economic in nature,  
19 and their stated goal was 'the people demand social justice', though  
20 their exact aims remained unclear and contested. However, the cost  
21 of living and the erosion of the welfare state were two main themes  
22 of the protesters (Cicurel and Litbeck-Hirsch, 2012; Rosenhek and  
23 Shalev, 2014).

24 Family policy was not at the centre of the protests, but was  
25 represented. As part of the general upsurge, a group of parents initiated  
26 what they called 'the stroller protest', in which, with their babies and  
27 toddlers in strollers, they protested against the cost of childrearing.  
28 Although the extension of leave entitlements was presented as part of  
29 the demands of this protest, the central demand was free education  
30 for children under six years old (Case, 2011, Nachmany, 2011). And  
31 indeed, in what is considered by many to be the most prominent  
32 tangible achievement of the protests, the Trachtenberg Committee,  
33 which was formed by Prime Minister Netanyahu to answer the  
34 demands of the protesters, recommended the extension of free public  
35 education to 3- to 5-year-olds, a recommendation accepted by the  
36 government (Amram, 2013). As can be seen above, however, the  
37 stroller protest had no effect on leave provision.

38 This situation changed in June 2016. Osnat Vatury, a mother who  
39 had recently given birth to her third child and had no previous political  
40 engagement, opened a Facebook page titled 'Parental Leave – It's  
41 Not a Right, It's Survival'. She claimed that the current paid leave of  
42 14 weeks was insufficient and called for an extension to six months.

The Facebook protest was an immediate success. Many fathers and (mainly) mothers joined the page, shared its posts and expressed sympathy and support for its causes. It received tens of thousands of 'Likes' within the first month, unprecedented by Israeli standards. Vatury designated 14 June to be a 'Facebook demonstration' day, in which all page followers were expected to change their profile picture in support of the initiative and write or share posts supporting an extension of Maternity Leave.

The success on social media was soon followed by interest from traditional media outlets. The protest received much positive coverage from the main media outlets in Israel, including newspapers and radio and television shows. The two most prominent examples were coverage on the *HaZinor* late night show, focusing on internet trends, which brought many new followers; and later an in-depth coverage of Vatury and the protest on *HaMa'arechet*, a prime-time news magazine on Israel's leading Channel 2.

The high profile of the protest, both on new and traditional media, soon attracted interest from the political arena. The first to bring the issue into the legislative field were opposition MKs. MK Manuel Trajtenberg presented a bill to enable a gradual return from Maternity Leave, permitting mothers to work part-time in the months following leave. MK Merav Michaeli proposed a drastic extension of leave for parents to nine months, following the 'Icelandic model' of three months for the mother, three for the father and three to share. (The author of this chapter took part in designing this bill.)

Unlike previous legislative moves, however, these initiatives were not left only to individual MKs and private bills. Following the massive political pressure, several players in government began to show interest in changes in leave policy, including the Minister of Finance, Moshe Cahlon. Pressured by Vatury, who at this stage was directing her protest towards him, he agreed that the country's leave policy should be changed. The pressure intensified in December 2016. The 2017 state budget was due to be finalised, and it was clear that if an extension of leave was not funded, it would be near impossible to implement any changes in 2017. After massive public pressure and several meetings with Vatury, Cahlon announced that a sum of NIS230 million would be included in the next budget to increase Maternity Leave, a sum estimated to be sufficient for a one-week extension.

Finance Minister Cahlon then appointed MK Rachel Azaria, a feminist from the centrist Kulanu Party (also Cahlon's) with a history of work-family balance legislation, to head a committee to examine the possibility of a change in leave policy, and to bring forward a proposal for

1 such change. Following the work of the committee, a bill was presented  
2 to the Knesset, including the extension of paid leave to 15 weeks. For  
3 the first time in the history of Israeli leave policy, the additional week  
4 was not solely for mothers, but given to the couple to be used either  
5 as an extension of the mother's leave or as paid leave for the father,  
6 with the possibility to use it while the mother was also on leave. Azaria  
7 and Cahlon also agreed a further extension of the leave to 16 weeks  
8 within a year. The bill was passed to a special committee, the 'Reform  
9 Committee', headed by Azaria, and passed at an accelerated pace, with  
10 little opposition. In March 2017, the first part of the bill passed the last  
11 stage of legislation and became law, extending paid leave to 15 weeks.

12 As demonstrated above, the initiative received full backing from  
13 Cahlon, the Minister of Finance. However, other ministers in  
14 relevant offices did not show interest or participate in the legislation.  
15 Specifically, the ministers of social equality, labour and welfare took  
16 no part in the process.

17 Judging by posts on the Facebook group wall and from traditional  
18 media coverage, responses to the new law were mixed. While the  
19 one-week extension was widely seen as positive, many considered it  
20 unsatisfactory and some even as insulting. The protest had stressed the  
21 importance of half a year of leave; 26 weeks, the length of the 'first  
22 unpaid leave', was put forward as a 'magic number' and as the target  
23 for the protestors. When the law was amended to provide only one  
24 extra week – instead of 12 – many parents expressed dissatisfaction,  
25 and some even claimed that the movement had failed.

26 Vatury, the initiator of the protest, gave a complex message. On  
27 the one hand, she stressed the importance of the one-week extension  
28 and the other aspects of the legislation; on the other, she claimed that  
29 she did not regard this bill, or even the promised future extension  
30 to 16 weeks, as the end of the matter, and made public her plans to  
31 continue the protest. Even Azaria, who was a main power behind the  
32 legislation, did not claim it was satisfactory, or that it should be the end  
33 of the reform process. On the contrary, she stressed that this legislation  
34 was only the first step of a long journey.

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## **Conclusion: a change failing to happen**

38 From the description above, a distinct tension in the field of leave  
39 policy in Israel emerges: on the one hand, according to policymakers  
40 and activists interviewed, leave reform enjoys wide support; on the  
41 other, such reform fails to come. However, this situation manifests  
42 itself differently at the two different stages of legislation.

The most prominent characteristic of the first stage legislation is that it was based on private bills. In every Knesset since 1992, a bill was presented to extend leave; the bills that passed, in 2007 and 2010, passed because of effective political lobbying by the proposing MKs. The bills were not part of a governmental plan, but rather an attempt by individual MKs – both from opposition and coalition parties – to push the length of leave as far as possible.

This leads to the next aspect of the private bills: they were not seen as a comprehensive solution to the social problem of the length of leave available to parents. The MKs behind the legislation did not claim that accepting their offer would provide parents with an ideal leave; rather, they acknowledged that the leave should either be longer (in the 2007 legislation) or fully paid (in 2010 and 2016). Their proposals were always a compromise, presented as the best one could achieve in the current political climate, and as a stepping stone toward future improvements.

Another important aspect of these three legislative attempts was the lack of ideological opposition. In all cases, the government opposed the legislation at certain stages (although in all cases, it finally backed it). However, in most cases, when the government opposed the legislation, it did not give reasons for doing so. Even when a minister did explain government opposition, he did not claim that it stemmed from opposition to the idea of a longer leave period, but rather from economic difficulties. This is how minister Yaacov Deri explained the government's position toward the 2006 legislation, in the first stage: 'The aim is wanted and blessed. The ILO recommends a 14-week parental leave [sic]. However, the cost to the state is enormous. The Ministry of Finance estimated the cost by NIS400 million per year' (105th sitting of the 17th Knesset, 6 May 2007).

One may assume, based on the positions of MKs and of the government, that the claim that paid leave is too short enjoys a wide consensus in Israeli society. The government's inadequate response to this claim probably originates in financial considerations. The Ministry of Finance is one of the strongest players in Israeli politics, and is a staunch supporter of economic austerity (Cohen, 2012). Therefore, the eventual outcome is a process of patching what everyone agrees is a broken programme, with what everyone agrees are inadequate patches.

The 2017 law is different from prior legislation in two important ways: first, it originated in a public protest, and not in MKs' initiatives; and second, it received full and constant backing from government officials, and specifically from Minister of Finance Moshe Cahlon. These two differences might be connected – the public support may

1 have pressured Cahlon to support the legislation. However, in other  
2 ways the legislative process seemed very similar to previous attempts at  
3 reform; there was no voiced ideological opposition to the legislation,  
4 the only argument against an extension being lack of funding. In  
5 addition, the legislation was not perceived as the installation of a  
6 comprehensive leave policy; rather, it was seen as a small step in the  
7 right direction, by all those involved.

8 To summarise, the decade of 2007–2017 can be seen as the harbinger  
9 of change in Israeli leave policy. In the 55 years before this decade,  
10 changes to policy were minor, and most notably the length of paid  
11 leave remained at 12 weeks for the entire period. But this decade,  
12 however, was characterised by real changes, aimed at lengthening the  
13 leave and making some of it available to fathers. All these changes were  
14 of limited scope and enjoyed limited success, but pointed the way for  
15 further extensions.

16 This pattern of ‘insufficient advances’, as it might be termed,  
17 originates from the tension of two conflicting developments in Israel.  
18 The first arises from the combination of familialism, changing women’s  
19 employment patterns, and the effects of international changes in leave  
20 policy. Israeli women are devoting more and more time to wage  
21 labour, while maintaining unmatched rates of fertility, which creates  
22 growing tensions for the family. At the same time, in an increasingly  
23 globalised culture, they are becoming aware of their counterparts  
24 in Europe, enjoying more generous leave provisions. Thus, in the  
25 debate around leave policy, a prominent argument is international  
26 comparison, citing both the example of other countries mainly in  
27 Scandinavia but also in other parts of Europe (the German *Elterngeld*  
28 reform of 2007 receiving much attention) and the recommendations of  
29 transnational organisations such as the ILO, WHO and EU. Against these  
30 raised demands and expectations, the neoliberal character of Israeli  
31 social policy, and specifically the ‘fire and forget’ element guiding  
32 family policy, dictate minimal expenditure on social programmes.  
33 Thus, while the expansion and extension of leave policies receives  
34 strong support among both the public and policymakers, the high costs  
35 of such reform lead the powerful Ministry of Finance to oppose such  
36 expansion, blocking anything that goes beyond the minimal.

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