

Paternity Leave Policies and Broader Social Policies Outcomes: The Moderating Role of Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles

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ABSTRACT

Paternity leave has increasingly attracted attention as an instrument through which governments and organisations can support father's participation in childcare, facilitate work-family reconciliation, and address gender inequalities in unpaid care work. However, the literature is commonly organised around separate policy domains, making it difficult to explain conceptually how paternity leave policy may operate as a cross-cutting social policy instrument. The framework is guided by Social Role Theory and incorporates Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles (CCFGR) as a moderator. The central argument is that the relationship between paternity leave policy and broader social policy outcomes is not necessarily uniform across social settings because culturally constructed expectations about masculinity, fatherhood, caregiving, breadwinning, and gender-appropriate behaviour may strengthen or weaken that relationship.

An integrative literature review was undertaken to establish and synthesise relevant conceptual and empirical literature from Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The review was used as a basis for conceptual synthesis rather than a source of new empirical findings. The resulting framework links paternity leave policy with three outcome domains: family policy, labour market policy, and gender-equality policy, while recognising cultural constructions of fatherhood and gender roles as a moderating condition. The Zimbabwean context raises the possibility that formal leave entitlements may interact with culturally embedded expectations concerning fathers' and mothers' responsibilities in ways that alter the extent to which policy objectives are realised. The paper contributes a theoretically informed framework and propositions that can guide future empirical testing, particularly in African contexts where policy design and cultural expectations may interact in distinctive ways.

Keywords: Paternity leave; social policy, family policy, labour-market policy, gender equality; Social Role Theory; gender roles; cultural constructions.

INTRODUCTION

The role of fathers in childcare and family responsibilities has attracted significantly scholarly and policy attention as societies seek to address persistent gender inequalities in unpaid care work, employment and family life (Brega, 2026). Traditionally, childcare and domestic responsibilities have been disproportionately associated with women, while men have often been positioned primarily as economic providers (Sahu, 2026). These socially constructed expectations have implications not only for family relationships and child wellbeing but also for women's labour market participation, men's involvement in caregiving, and the organisation of work. Paternity leave has consequently emerged as an important policy instrument through which governments and organisations can encourage fathers' participation in early childcare, facilitate the redistribution of caregiving responsibilities, and support the reconciliation of work and family life (Ashmi & Rajavenkatesan, 2026).

Paternity leave generally refers to leave granted to fathers around the birth or adoption of a child to enable them to provide care and support to their families. Although paternity leave is often treated as an employment-related benefit, its implications extend considerably beyond the workplace (Mathur & Devanda, 2026). Its design, availability, duration, remuneration, eligibility requirements, and uptake can influence family wellbeing, fathers' engagement in childcare, mothers' participation in the paid employment, workplace practices, and broader patterns of gender relations. Paternity leave should therefore be understood as part of a wider social-policy system in which family policy, labour market policy, and gender equality policy interact (Tarrant et al., 2026). Nevertheless, much of the existing literature has examined paternity leave in relation to individual outcomes or within particular policy domains, resulting in comparatively limited conceptual integration of these interconnected dimensions.

The significance of paternity leave is also reflected in international policy debates concerning decent work, family, wellbeing, and gender equality. International organisations increasingly recognise the importance of policies that enable workers to reconcile employment with family responsibilities (Ristovski, 2026). The International Labour Organisation (ILO), through its maternity protection and related policy instruments, has promoted measures that support workers with family responsibilities and encourage greater sharing of care responsibilities (Khandelwal & Ravindranath, 2026). Similarly, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, provide a broader policy context for considering measures that challenge gender-based inequalities and promote inclusive labour-market participation (Leal Filho et al., 2023). Within this context, paternity and parental leave policies have become increasingly relevant to discussions about redistribution of unpaid care work, fathers' participation in family life, women's employment, and the creation of family-supportive workplaces.

International experience demonstrates considerable variation in the design and implementation of paternity and parental leave policies. Several European countries have developed relatively comprehensive parental-leave systems that provide fathers with specific or non-transferable periods of leave (Lütolf, 2025). Countries such as Sweden and Iceland are frequently discussed in the literature because of their efforts to encourage fathers' participation in childcare and promote a more balanced distribution of parental responsibilities (Eydal, Arnalds, & Gíslason, 2025). However, the existence of a formal policy does not automatically translate into equitable outcomes. Policy accessibility, compensation levels, workplace culture, employment conditions, awareness, and socially constructed expectations about appropriate roles for men and women can influence whether fathers actually utilise available leave (Craig Aulisi & Kuykendall, 2026). This distinction between policy provision and policy utilisation is important because the broader social-policy effects of paternity leave depend not only on whether leave exists, but also on whether fathers can realistically access and utilise it (André, Cammu & Meuleman, 2025).

The African context presents additional complexities. Many African countries continue to experience strong gendered divisions of labour alongside changing patterns of women's participation in formal employment and men's involvement in childcare (Furniss, 2026). The development of parental and paternity leave policies therefore raises questions about how formal policy arrangements interact with cultural expectations, workplace practices, household responsibilities, and socio-economic conditions. South Africa has undertaken significant development in its parental-leave framework, including legal reforms intended to provide more equitable parental rights (Oni & Olawanle, 2026). Such developments illustrate the growing regional recognition that leave policies should respond to the caregiving responsibilities of parents more broadly rather than treating childcare predominantly as a maternal responsibility.

The Zimbabwean context provides an important setting for examining these issues. Zimbabwe has adopted various legal and policy measures addressing employment, family, welfare, and gender equality; however, significant challenges remain concerning the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities and the equitable distribution of caregiving (Mhandu & Muzvidziwa, 2026). The country's statutory framework has historically provided more explicit protection for maternity leave than for fathers' leave. Consequently, working fathers may depend on organisational arrangements, employment contracts, or other forms of leave when seeking time away from work following the birth or adoption of a child (Atkinson, 2025). The absence or limited provision of statutory paternity-leave raises important questions concerning how fathers are enabled

to participate in early childcare and how the existing policy environment influences families, employers, and gender relations. The Zimbabwean situation is particularly important because workplace policies do not operate independently of social expectations. Fathers may experience expectations to prioritise employment and income generation, while mothers may continue to be expected to assume primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work (Ngan & Chan, 2025). In some cultural settings, active involvement by fathers in routine childcare may be viewed as inconsistent with conventional expectations of masculinity, may be associated with women's work, or may be interpreted as a departure from the traditional provider role (Wang & Deng, 2026). Such perceptions can influence fathers' willingness or ability to take leave even where some form of leave is available. Consequently, understanding paternity leave requires attention not only to formal policy provisions but also to the cultural constructions of fatherhood and gender roles that shape how paternal caregiving is perceived, accepted, and enacted (Mauerer, 2025).

This study is theoretically informed by Social Role Theory, which provides a useful lens for examining the relationship between socially constructed gender roles and patterns of behaviour within families and workplaces. The theory suggests that expectations concerning the appropriate behaviour of men and women are shaped by the social roles assigned to them (Kocanci, Aksoy, & Namal, 2025). Applied to paternity leave, Social Role Theory provides a basis for examining how conventional expectations of fathers as breadwinners and mothers as primary caregivers may influence the utilisation and outcomes of paternity leave. It also provides a conceptual foundation for considering whether supportive paternity leave arrangements can contribute to changes in established gender roles by enabling fathers to participate more actively in childcare and encouraging a more equitable distribution of family responsibilities.

Building on Social Role Theory, this paper develops a conceptual framework incorporating Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles as a moderating construct. The moderator captures culturally embedded expectations concerning fatherhood, caregiving, domestic responsibilities, and the appropriate division of family and employment roles between men and women. The paper proposes that these cultural constructions may strengthen or weaken the relationships between paternity leave policy and broader social policy outcomes. Where paternal caregiving is socially accepted and fatherhood incorporates active participation in childcare, paternity leave may be more readily utilised and may have stronger implications for family wellbeing, labour-market outcomes, and gender equality. Conversely, where caregiving is strongly associated with women or where men's identities are closely linked to breadwinning, authority, and economic provision, cultural expectations may constrain the utilisation and potential effects of paternity leave (Koslowski & O'Brien, 2022). Cultural constructions are therefore positioned not simply as contextual background but as a potential mechanism through which the effects of paternity leave policy vary across social settings. From this perspective, paternity leave represents more than an employment entitlement. It assumes the function as a potential mechanism for influencing the social organisation of caregiving, workplace participation, and gender relations. The relationship can be considered across three interconnected policy domains. Family policy concerns the capacity of leave arrangements to support parents. Fathers' involvement in childcare, family wellbeing, and work-family reconciliation (Hokke et al., 2026). Labour market policy concerns the implications of leave arrangements for employment participation, workplace practices, employee retention, productivity, and the reconciliation of paid work and family responsibilities (Yeandle, 2025). Gender equality policy concerns the redistribution of unpaid care work, the transformation of gendered expectations, and the creation of more equitable opportunities for women and men (Mehta & Mehta, 2025). These dimensions provide the conceptual basis for examining paternity as a cross-cutting social policy instrument, while Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles provides a basis for why its effects may vary across cultural contexts.

Although previous studies have generated important insights into the effects of paternity and parental leave, the literature remains fragmented across the policy domains. Research has examined issues such as fathers' involvement in childcare, child and family wellbeing, maternal employment, workplace outcomes, and gender equality. However, comparatively limited attention has been given to how these outcomes are interconnected within a broader social-policy framework and how culturally constructed expectations of fatherhood and gender roles may condition these relationships, particularly in the Zimbabwean context. This creates both a gap which is both conceptual and contextual. Conceptually there is need for an integrated explanation of how

paternity leave connects family, labour-market, and gender-equality outcomes and how cultural constructions may moderate these relationships in Zimbabwe, where institutional arrangements and social arrangements may differ from those in countries that dominate the existing literature. Contextually, paternity leave has not been conceptualised as an employment benefit and not a cross-cutting social policy with ramifications for family, labour market, and gender-equality outcomes.

The paper does not report a new empirical study, does not claim statistically established relationships, and does not present participant-based findings. Instead, it integrates existing literature through an integrative literature review and uses Social Role Theory to develop a theoretically informed conceptual model and propositions for future empirical investigation.

Research Objectives:

1. To synthesise the literature on the relationship between paternity leave policies and family policy outcomes.
2. To conceptualise the impact of paternity leave policies on labour market outcomes.
3. To integrate the gender-equality implications of paternity leave into a broader social-policy framework.
4. To theorise the extent to which cultural constructions on fatherhood and gender roles moderate the relationship between paternity leave and broader social policy.
5. To develop an integrated conceptual framework linking paternity leave, broader social-policy outcomes and cultural constructions of fatherhood and gender roles.

Purpose and Conceptual Objectives

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to develop an integrated framework explaining how paternity leave policy may relate to family outcomes, labour-market policy outcomes, gender equality policy outcomes, and how Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles may moderate these relationships.

- To conceptualise paternity leave as a cross-cutting social policy instrument linking family, labour market and gender equality policy domains.
- To integrate Social Role Theory into an explanation of how socially constructed expectations concerning fatherhood and gender roles may shape the relationship between paternity leave policy and broader social policy outcomes.
- To develop Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles as a moderating construct that may strengthen or weaken the relationships between paternity leave policy and the three outcome domains.
- To formulate conceptual propositions that can guide future empirical testing in Zimbabwe and comparable African contexts.

Conceptual Approach: Integrative Literature Review

This paper employed an integrative literature review appropriately given its elected purpose to bring together diverse conceptual and empirical contributions in order to develop/refine a theoretical explanation. The review therefore served as the evidentiary foundation for conceptual synthesis rather than as a statistical aggregation of empirical results.

The literature was searched primarily through Scopus, Web of Science, and PubMed, with Google Scholar used as a supplementary search engine. Search terms included combinations of paternity leave, parental leave, family policy, labour market policy, gender equality, father involvement, and work-family balance. A total of 100 papers were initially identified; following the removal of duplicates, 65 papers remained. These papers

were screened against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in 40 papers undergoing full-text assessment, of which 20 were fully included in the review. Studies were included which addressed paternity or parental leave and its relationship with family, labour market, or gender equality outcomes and provided pertinent conceptual or empirical evidence. Duplicates, studies outside the substantive scope of the study, and publications lacking sufficient relevance to the research focus were excluded. The review process was used to identify recurring constructs, theoretical relationships, contextual conditions, and unresolved conceptual connections. The analysis of the reviewed studies probed how the collective insights could be organised into an integrated conceptual explanation. The conceptual synthesis identified four interconnected elements:

- i. The design and accessibility of paternity leave policy;
- ii. Family-related outcomes associated with fathers' opportunities for caregiving and work-family reconciliation;
- iii. Labour market and workplace outcomes associated with the reconciliation of employment and family responsibilities; and
- iv. Gender-equality outcomes associated with the redistribution of unpaid care work.

Across these elements, the literature also points to socially constructed expectations concerning fatherhood and gender as an important contextual condition. These elements provide the foundation for the proposed framework.

Conceptualising Paternity Leave Policy

For purposes of the framework, Paternity Leave Policy (PLP) refers to the formal policy arrangements through which fathers are granted time away from paid employment following childbirth or adoption in order to undertake caregiving and family-support responsibilities. The construct encompasses policy availability, duration, remuneration, eligibility, accessibility and implementation. These dimensions matter because a nominal entitlement may have limited practical relevance if fathers cannot access it, cannot afford to use it, or work in environments where taking leave is discouraged. The conceptual distinction between policy provision and policy utilisation is particularly important. Formal policy establishes an institutional opportunity whereas actual utilisation may depend on organisational support, employment conditions, household circumstances and cultural expectations. The framework therefore treats PLP as a policy input whose broader consequences are contingent rather than automatic. This position is consistent with literature suggesting that leave design and workplace conditions can influence fathers' use of leave and the nature of their involvement in care work (Craig & Kuykendall, 2026; Eydal, Arnalds, & Gíslason, 2025; Lütolf, 2025).

Broader Social Policy Outcomes

Family Policy Outcomes

Family policy outcomes in the proposed framework refer to outcomes concerning family wellbeing, father involvement, caregiving participation, parent-child relationships and work-family reconciliation. Paternity leave may create an opportunity for fathers to be physically present during an important period of family adjustment and early childcare. The literature on father involvement and parental leave provides a basis for considering how policy-supported opportunities for caregiving may contribute to family relationships and the distribution of care work (Doucet & McKay, 2020; Klode et al., 2026). The framework does not, however, assume that every leave entitlement will generate the same family outcome. The quality and extent of care giving, duration of leave, household arrangements and cultural expectations may alter the relationship.

Labour Market Policy Outcomes

Labour market policy outcomes concern work-family reconciliation, workplace participation, employee retention, organisational support and the compatibility between employment and family responsibilities. Paternity leave can conceptually support labour market participation by enabling employees to manage family

responsibilities without necessarily withdrawing permanently from employment. At the same time, the effects may depend on organisational practices and whether fathers perceive leave-taking as legitimate within their workplaces. Literature concerning work-care reconciliation and supportive organisational practices therefore provides a basis for positioning paternity leave within a broader labour market policy system (Plasová, Valentová, & Alieva, 2026).

Gender Equality Policy Outcomes

Gender equality outcomes concern the distribution of unpaid care work, fathers' participation in domestic responsibilities, mothers' opportunities to participate in paid work, and the extent to which gendered assumptions about caregiving are reproduced or challenged. The conceptual logic is that policies directed at fathers may contribute to a redistribution of care work by creating institutional opportunities for men to undertake caregiving. However, policy provision alone may not transform established patterns of behaviour. Research on fathers' leave and gender equality highlights the importance of considering what leave enables fathers to do and whether it changes the division of care work rather than merely increasing fathers' formal entitlement to leave (Doucet & McKay, 2020; Ngan & Chan, 2025)

Theoretical Foundation: Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory provides the principal theoretical foundation for the proposed framework. The theory explains how gender differences in behaviour and expectations can emerge from the social roles allocated to women and men. In contexts where women are associated more strongly with caregiving and men with breadwinning, individuals may internalise expectations concerning appropriate behaviour. These expectations can influence decisions, organisational interactions, and family practices. Thus, the theory is useful for explaining why a formal gender-neutral or father-inclusive policy may not have uniform consequences across social settings.

Applied to paternity leave, Social Role Theory suggests that policy creates an institutional opportunity for fathers to occupy a caregiving role, but the meaning and uptake of that opportunity may be influenced by prevailing expectations concerning masculinity, fatherhood and gender-appropriate behaviour. Where active father involvement is socially accepted, leave may be more readily interpreted as a legitimate component of fatherhood. Where caregiving is strongly associated with women and breadwinning with men, fathers may face social or organisational pressures that constrain the practical significance of the entitlement. The theory, therefore, provides the explanatory foundation for incorporating cultural constructions as a moderator. The framework extends the application of Social Role Theory by moving from an explanation of gendered behaviour to an explanation of policy effectiveness. The key theoretical proposition is not that culture simply causes fathers to behave in a particular way, nor that culture is a mechanism through which leave produces outcomes. Rather, cultural constructions may condition the strength of the relationship between Paternity Leave Policy and broader social policy outcomes. This is the conceptual role assigned to Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles in the framework.

Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles as a Moderator

Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles (CCFGR) refers to socially and culturally embedded understandings of what fathers and mothers are expected to do within families and society. It encompasses expectations concerning masculinity, fatherhood, breadwinning, caregiving, domestic responsibilities, and appropriate gender behaviour. The construct is conceptually distinct from the outcomes of paternity leave and is also distinct from the mechanisms through which leave may be operationalised.

CCFGR is retained as a moderator because the argument of this paper is explicitly concerned with conditional strength. A moderator changes the direction or strength of a relationship between an independent variable and an outcome. In the proposed framework, the question is therefore whether the relationship between PLP and family, labour market and gender equality outcomes may be stronger under cultural conditions that support involved fatherhood and shared caregiving and weaker where dominant expectations strongly associate

caregiving with women and breadwinning with men. This treatment of CCFGR prevents the framework from treating culture as an intervening process when the intended theoretical function is conditionality.

The Zimbabwean context raises the possibility that culturally embedded expectations about fatherhood, masculinity and household responsibilities may shape the strength of relationships between paternity leave and broader social policy outcomes. This is presented as a contextual possibility rather than an established empirical finding of this paper. Future research would be required to determine the extent and form of such moderation in Zimbabwe and other African settings.

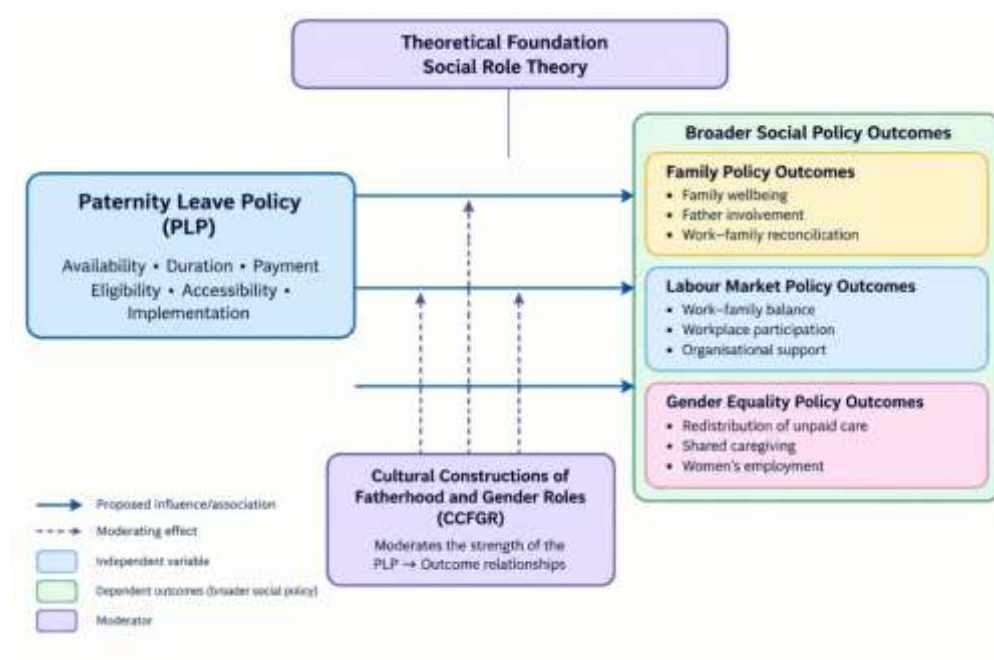
The Integrated Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework positions PLP as the independent construct and three domains of broader social policy outcomes as the dependent constructs: Family Policy Outcomes, Labour Market Policy Outcomes, and Gender Equality Policy Outcomes. CCFGR is positioned as a moderator of the relationship between PLP and each outcome domain. Social Role Theory provides the overarching theoretical foundation explaining why culturally prescribed gender roles may condition the effectiveness of a policy intended to increase fathers' participation in caregiving.

The framework therefore follows the logic:

- i. policy provision creates an institutional opportunity;
- ii. the opportunity is relevant to several interconnected policy domains; and
- iii. the strength of the relationship between policy and outcomes may vary according to cultural constructions of fatherhood and gender roles.

The framework deliberately avoids presenting utilisation, caregiving participation or workplace support as formal mediators because the current conceptual argument is centred on moderation. Those processes may be investigated as mechanisms in future empirical studies without changing the present moderator specification.



Conceptual and Theoretical Gap

The literature reviewed for this paper suggests several gaps that justify an integrated conceptual framework.

- i. Paternity leave is often examined within a single domain, such as fathers' caregiving, employment or gender equality.

- ii. Studies of leave utilisation and outcomes do not always place cultural constructions of fatherhood and gender roles at the centre of policy-outcome relationship.
- iii. The African context remains important because policy arrangements may operate within social environments characterised by distinctive expectations concerning gender, family responsibilities and work.

The theoretical gap addressed by this paper is therefore the limited integration of Social Role Theory with a cross-domain social-policy framework in which cultural constructions are explicitly modelled as a moderator. The proposed framework does not claim that existing literature has established the propositions empirically. Rather, it provides a theoretically coherent structure within which the relationships can be examined empirically in future research.

Zimbabwean Context and Conceptual Relevance

Zimbabwe provides a relevant contextual setting for examining the proposed framework because of questions concerning family responsibilities, employment, and gender roles intersect with formal employment arrangements and wider social and cultural expectations. The purpose of including Zimbabwe in this conceptual paper is because its context raises the possibility that formal paternity leave arrangements may interact with culturally constructed expectations concerning fatherhood, masculinity, breadwinning, and caregiving. This contextual positioning is important for avoiding an assumption that policy models developed in one setting will operate identically elsewhere. The framework suggests that the effectiveness of paternity leave may depend partly on whether fathers' use of leave is socially and organisationally compatible with prevailing expectations. The framework is also potentially relevant beyond Zimbabwe. Comparative African settings may exhibit different combinations of formal policy provision, labour market structures, family arrangements and cultural expectations. Comparative research could therefore test whether the proposed relationships are context-specific or demonstrate broader explanatory evidence.

Theoretical, Conceptual and Policy Contributions

Theoretical Contribution

The primary theoretical contribution is the extension of Social Role Theory into the analysis of paternity leave policy effectiveness. Rather than utilising the theory only to explain gendered behaviour, the framework uses it to explain why the same policy intervention may have different strengths of association with broader social policy outcomes under different cultural constructions of fatherhood and gender roles. CCFGR is consequently specified as a moderator, preserving a clear distinction between contextual conditionality and causal mechanism.

Conceptual Contribution

Conceptually, the framework integrates three policy domains that are often considered separately: family policy, labour market policy, and gender equality policy. It positions paternity leave as a cross-cutting policy instrument whose potential implications extend beyond the employment relationship. The framework also provides a parsimonious way of representing cultural variation without treating culture as an additional outcome or an unspecified contextual background variable.

Policy and Practice Contribution

For policymakers, the framework suggests that evaluating paternity leave should involve more than assessing whether a formal entitlement exists. Policy design, accessibility, compensation, and implementation may need to be considered alongside organisational support and social expectations concerning fatherhood. For employers and HR practitioners, the framework highlights the importance of workplace conditions that make leave-taking practically legitimate and feasible. For gender-equality policy, the framework directs attention to whether leave arrangements create meaningful opportunities for men to participate in unpaid care work than

merely providing formal entitlement. These implications are conceptual and literature grounded, and not derived from empirical findings.

DISCUSSION

The central argument developed in this paper is that paternity leave should be conceptualised as a cross-cutting social policy instrument rather than solely as an employment benefit. Its potential relevance spans family wellbeing and caregiving, labour market reconciliation, and gender equality. Social Role Theory provides a useful explanation for why the effects of a policy intended to support fathers' caregiving may vary according to social expectations concerning what fathers and mothers are expected to do.

The moderator specification is central to this argument. If cultural constructions of fatherhood and gender roles support the legitimacy of involved fatherhood, the relationship between leave provision and broader outcomes may be strengthened. Conversely, where cultural expectations strongly associate caregiving with women and breadwinning with men, the relationship may be weakened. The framework identifies a theoretically plausible relationship that warrants empirical investigation.

The framework also clarifies an important distinction between policy design and policy effectiveness. A formal entitlement may be necessary for enabling fathers to take leave, but it may not be sufficient to produce broader outcomes. Accessibility, remuneration, organisational support, and social expectations may affect whether the entitlement is translated into practice. Future empirical work can examine these mechanisms while retaining CCFGR as the moderator specified in the conceptual model. The three outcome domains are deliberately interconnected. Family outcomes may influence work-family reconciliation, workplace practices may affect the feasibility of caregiving, and the distribution of caregiving may have implications for gender equality. Treating these domains as separate but related outcomes enables future studies to test whether paternity leave has differentiated associations across policy systems rather than assuming a single undifferentiated outcome.

Implications for Future Empirical Research

The framework provides a research agenda rather than an empirical conclusion. Future studies could initially operationalise PLP across availability, duration, payment, eligibility, accessibility and implementation. CCFGR could be operationalised through measures of expectations concerning masculinity, breadwinning, father involvement, caregiving, and gender-appropriate family roles. Family, labour market and gender-equality outcomes could then be operationalised as distinct but related constructs.

Quantitative studies could test the proposed moderation relationships using hierarchical regression, integration analysis or structural equation modelling. Such studies would be able to determine whether CCFGR significantly changes the strength of the PLP-outcome relationships. Qualitative studies could complement this work by exploring how fathers, mothers, employers and policymakers interpret fatherhood, leave-taking, and caregiving. Mixed-methods research could subsequently integrate these strands to explain both the magnitude and meaning of observed relationships. Comparative research across African countries would be particularly useful for examining whether the proposed framework is transferable across different policy and cultural environments. Longitudinal research could also assess whether repeated exposure to father-specific leave changes social expectations concerning fatherhood over time. These studies would allow the conceptual propositions advanced here to be supported, refined or rejected on the basis of empirical evidence.

Limitations of the Conceptual Paper

As a conceptual paper, this study does not provide primary empirical evidence with which to establish causal or statistically significant relationships. The propositions are therefore theoretical and literature-grounded rather than empirically verified. The integrative literature review also differs from a systematic review in its purpose and synthesis approach; it was taken to support conceptual integration rather than exhaustive statistical aggregation. In addition, the proposed framework requires empirical operationalisation before the constructs and moderation relationships can be assessed rigorously.

A further limitation is that the Zimbabwean context is used primarily to establish contextual relevance rather than to provide empirical confirmation. Statements about cultural expectations in Zimbabwe should therefore be treated as propositions for investigation and not as established findings of this paper. Future Zimbabwean research should gather context-specific evidence before making claims about the prevalence or strength of particular cultural constructions.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper developed an integrated framework linking Paternity Leave Policy with family policy outcomes, labour market policy outcomes, and gender-equality outcomes. Guided by the Social Role Theory, the framework places Cultural Constructions of Fatherhood and Gender Roles at the centre of the conditional relationship between policy and outcomes. The moderator specification is intentional, cultural constructions are proposed to change the strength of the relationships rather than to serve as mechanisms through which paternity leave produces outcomes. The conceptual contribution lies in treating paternity leave as a cross-cutting social policy instrument and in providing a theoretically grounded explanation for why its potential outcomes may vary across cultural contexts. The Zimbabwean context raises the possibility that formal paternity leave arrangements may interact with culturally constructed expectations concerning fatherhood, masculinity and caregiving. This possibility requires empirical investigation rather than assumption. Overall, the proposed framework shifts the question from whether paternity leave simply exists to how, and under what cultural conditions, it may be associated with wider social policy outcomes. Future empirical studies can test, refine, and potentially extend the framework by examining the proposed moderation relationships and the mechanisms through which leave may translate into changes in family practices, labour market experiences, and gender relations.

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