

A Comprehensive Review of Gender-Neutral Parental Leave in the Indian Private Sector



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Executive Summary

This comprehensive review explores the evolution, implementation, and impact of gender-neutral parental leave policies in India's private sector. Traditionally, corporate parental leave has been heavily skewed toward maternity benefits, with women receiving 26 weeks of paid leave while men typically received just 5 to 15 days, if any. This imbalance has reinforced rigid gender roles in caregiving and hindered equitable workplace participation. However, a visible shift is underway. Influenced by global best practices and shifting societal expectations, a number of progressive Indian companies are embracing gender-neutral or primary-secondary caregiver models, offering all parents meaningful time off, regardless of gender or biological relation to the child.

Companies such as Zomato, Standard Chartered, HUL, Diageo, Volvo, Colgate-Palmolive, Meesho, and Novartis are among those leading the charge. These organizations have moved beyond the standard maternity-paternity binary to implement inclusive policies that cover adoptive parents, same-sex couples, single parents, and even surrogacy cases. Leave durations for non-birthing parents now range from 12 to 30 weeks, reflecting a growing commitment to equitable caregiving and diverse family realities.

Despite these advancements, actual employee uptake, especially among men, remains low. Several factors contribute to this including workplace stigma, fear of career penalties, concerns about bonus eligibility, and a lack of visible leadership support. Nonetheless, internal champions, storytelling, and leadership modeling have begun shifting mindsets. For many employees, witnessing peers or leaders taking leave plays a key role in normalizing shared parenting.

India's legal framework still lags. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 mandates paid leave only for birthing mothers in the private sector. There is currently no statutory requirement for paternity leave, placing the onus entirely on employers. Some state governments and public-sector bodies (e.g., Sikkim, Uttarakhand) have introduced paternity leave, but these remain outliers. In the absence of a national mandate, private employers are voluntarily defining the next frontier in family-friendly work culture. These policies are not just about inclusion — they are strategic levers for retention, equity, and employer branding. Companies that offer gender-neutral leave report improvements in women's return-to-work rates, male participation in caregiving, and a more inclusive organizational culture. In a competitive talent market, such policies help position organizations as progressive and people-first.

Global comparisons show that while Indian employers are making bold moves, countries like Sweden and Japan continue to set the gold standard through mandated equal leave and cultural reinforcement. However, India's private sector is demonstrating what's possible in the absence of legislative nudges particularly in sectors such as technology, finance, FMCG, and pharmaceuticals.

Best practices emerging from this review include offering equal-duration leave irrespective of gender, supporting extended leave for adoptive or surrogate parents, ensuring cultural sensitization of managers, enabling flexible return-to-work options, and closely tracking uptake data to identify gaps.

In conclusion, while India still has a long road ahead in institutionalizing gender-neutral caregiving, the momentum is building. The shift toward inclusive and equitable parental policies is not just a symbolic act of progress, it is a fundamental redesign of how workplaces support families. For organizations that wish to lead with empathy and equity, gender-neutral parental leave is both a moral responsibility and a strategic advantage.

Introduction

Gender-neutral parental leave refers to leave policies that apply equally to any parent, regardless of gender, often framing entitlements around the *primary* or *secondary caregiver* rather than “maternity” or “paternity.” In India’s traditionally gendered landscape of parental leave, this marks a significant shift. Historically, most Indian companies provided generous maternity leave (now mandated at 26 weeks by law) but minimal time off for new fathers – typically just a week or two¹. This disparity reinforced the norm of mothers as default caregivers and fathers as bystanders. However, with changing family structures and a growing focus on workplace diversity and inclusion, India’s private sector has begun evolving its approach. Companies are increasingly acknowledging that parenting is a shared responsibility and that supporting both parents can improve work-life balance and employee well-being². Global trends have also set examples – for instance, several multinational employers and even governments abroad now offer equal parental leave for both parents, underscoring the benefits of shared childcare duties³. These influences, coupled with rising awareness, are catalyzing a gradual but notable adoption of gender-neutral or caregiver-based leave policies in corporate India.

Methodology

A systematic secondary research methodology was employed to conduct a comprehensive review of gender-neutral parental leave in the Indian private sector. More than forty relevant articles and publications were identified through targeted searches of grey literature. Extracted data on policy features and outcomes were then synthesized thematically to provide a robust and nuanced understanding of the existing landscape. It should be noted that the sources included in this review consist primarily of web articles and industry reports, which may vary in terms of potential variations in data accuracy, methodological rigour and editorial oversight.

Adoption Trends in India’s Private Sector

Slow beginnings: India has traditionally lagged on paternity leave. Until recently, most organizations offered only 5–15 days of paid leave for new fathers, versus 26 weeks for new mothers by law⁴. This gap made it hard for fathers to participate meaningfully in early childcare and reinforced outdated gender roles. In the absence of any legal mandate for private-sector paternity leave (only central government employees are assured 15 days by rule), many companies simply defaulted to minimal provisions. After pay, India scored the least on the parenthood indicator of the World Bank’s Women, Business and Law indicator. The low score is due to lack of paternity leave and the government’s failure to administer 100% of maternity leave benefits.⁵

Momentum for change: Over the past few years, a noticeable shift has begun. India Inc is now “ramping up its parental leave policies” extending paternity leave durations and broadening eligibility to include adoptive, surrogate, and LGBTQ+ parents. Progressive employers recognize that inclusive parental benefits help attract and retain talent in a changing social landscape. The trend started picking up around 2017–2019, when a few trailblazers introduced equal parental leave, and has accelerated into the 2020s. By 2022–2024, especially in sectors like technology, finance, and professional services, companies have substantially enhanced leave for secondary caregivers (often fathers or non-birthing partners) and even reframed policies in gender-neutral terms⁶. An HR industry study noted that among the “100 Best Companies for Women” in India, 99% now offer some paid paternity leave, ranging from around 18 days up to 16 weeks. This signals that top employers are moving towards a “*male ally*” culture where fatherhood is supported⁷. Overall adoption is still uneven across the broader private sector (smaller firms often lag due to cost or cultural hesitance), but the direction is set: gender-neutral parental leave is gaining ground as a mainstream consideration for Indian employers.

Pioneering Companies and Policies in India

Several companies, from global banks to local startups have led the way with innovative parental leave policies that go beyond statutory requirements. Below, we highlight major organizations in India that have implemented gender-neutral or primary/secondary caregiver-based leave, along with the nature of their policies (duration, eligibility, etc.):

- **Zomato (tech startup):** In 2019, Zomato made headlines by offering 26 weeks of fully paid parental leave for both women and men, in every country it operates. *“There won’t be even an iota of difference in parental leave policy for men and women at Zomato,”* announced CEO Deepinder Goyal⁸. This policy equal to the government-mandated maternity leave applies to new parents across birth or adoption, and even included an INR 70,000 (~\$1000) bonus per child. Zomato’s move was among the first by an Indian startup to set parental leave parity.
- **Novartis (pharmaceutical MNC):** The company rolled out a 26-week gender-neutral parental leave globally, including in India, effective July 2019⁹. All new parents - whether by birth, surrogacy or adoption are eligible for six months paid leave. This put Novartis alongside a handful of multinationals committing to equal leave for both parents.
- **Standard Chartered Bank:** In 2023, Standard Chartered India announced 20 weeks of leave for new fathers (paternity) and adoptive parents, available *“irrespective of gender, relationship status or how a child becomes part of an employee’s family”*¹⁰. This is an inclusivity push to support all employees in balancing career and caregiving. Notably, the bank continues to offer 26 weeks for birthing mothers (per law) and 20 weeks for the other parent, effectively narrowing the gap between maternity and paternity benefits.
- **Colgate-Palmolive India:** In 2024, Colgate India extended its *“supportive caregiver”* (secondary caregiver) leave from 4 weeks to 3 months (12 weeks) to encourage shared parenting¹¹. This leave can be taken within a year of a child’s birth or adoption by the partner/spouse of the primary caregiver. Colgate explicitly covers biological parents, adoptive parents, and those having children via surrogacy under this policy. The company’s HR head noted the initiative is about *“promoting shared parenting”* where both the partners get a chance to be a part of the child’s infancy journey and can support each other in early childcare, without work related anxieties.
- **Volvo Group India:** In 2023, Volvo India launched a robust gender-neutral parental leave program. It offers 26 weeks fully paid leave for the primary caregiver (which can be any parent, based on who takes on primary childcare), plus an optional additional 26 weeks of unpaid leave or flexible work arrangement¹². For the secondary caregiver, Volvo provides 1 month of paid leave, which can be taken in parts within the first year of the child’s arrival. This policy is applicable to all genders and covers children welcomed by birth, adoption, or surrogacy.
- **Volvo Car India:** In addition to Volvo Group India, Volvo Car India has introduced a globally aligned, gender-neutral parental leave policy called Family Bond¹³. Under this initiative, employees regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or mode of parenthood (birth, adoption, surrogacy) are entitled to 24 weeks of parental leave at 80% of their base pay, provided they have completed at least one year of service. This policy reinforces the company’s inclusive values and supports caregiving equity across all types of families.
- **JP Morgan India:** Effective 2023, JP Morgan Chase India expanded its paternity leave from a mere 10 days to 16 weeks of paid leave for new fathers¹⁴. Notably,

this benefit also applies to adoptive and surrogate parents, indicating a shift to a broader “parental leave” concept. The company cites employee well-being and adapting to social changes (e.g. more nuclear families) as reasons for the change.

- **NatWest Group (formerly RBS):** NatWest’s India operations implemented a “*partner leave*” policy allowing any new parent (birth, adoption, surrogacy) up to 12 weeks of paid leave irrespective of gender¹⁵. This policy, effective 2023, requires a minimum tenure (6+ months service) and is open to same-sex and heterosexual partners alike.
- **Ikea India:** In 2017, the furnishings company announced a new parental leave policy in which all employees, including men, were entitled to six months of parental paid leave¹⁶. In addition to the 26 weeks leave, women employees have an option of truncated work hours by 50 per cent for another 16 weeks.
- **Goldman Sachs India:** Introduced in 2019, Goldman Sachs India offers a progressive parental leave policy providing 26 weeks of paid leave to all new parents¹⁷, irrespective of gender.
- **Pfizer India:** In 2023 Pfizer India introduced 12 weeks of paid paternity leave for all male employees becoming fathers, including via adoption¹⁸. Uniquely, Pfizer allows the 12 weeks to be taken flexibly over a period of up to two years after the child’s arrival. The company frames this benefit as part of its diversity & inclusion strategy – enabling men to “*invest equal time in their roles as a parent*” and thus advancing gender equity at work.
- **Diageo India:** In late 2022, spirits company Diageo rolled out a “family leave” policy offering 26 weeks fully paid leave to *any* new parent – regardless of gender or sexual orientation¹⁹. The 26-week leave can be taken within 12 months of the child’s birth or adoption, and covers biological births, adoptions, and surrogacy situations. This was among the first truly gender-neutral, equal-duration parental leave policies in the Indian FMCG sector.
- **Cyient:** The Hyderabad-based engineering firm Cyient announced a 12-week gender-neutral parental leave across its global offices in 2022²⁰. Any Cyient employee who becomes a parent – whether by birth or adoption, regardless of gender – may take up to 12 weeks off at full pay. This policy explicitly covers “*birth and adoptive parents of any gender.*” Cyient’s move was lauded for recognizing non-traditional families and was in line with similar policies at some IT multinationals.
- **Meesho:** Among Indian startups, e-commerce firm Meesho set a new benchmark by offering 30 weeks of gender-neutral parental leave²¹ in the early 2020s while secondary caregivers are eligible for 30 days leave. This 30-week leave can be taken by any new parent (far exceeding the typical offerings in India) and positions Meesho as one of the most generous in this space. Such a long leave duration is rare even globally and signifies a strong commitment to care and wellbeing of employees.
- **Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL):** HUL has made all its parental leave policies gender-neutral, covering birth, adoption, and surrogacy. In 2023 it introduced a “*foster/kinship caregiver*” leave of up to 4 weeks for employees who take in a child (such as via pre-adoption foster care or legal guardianship)²². It also enhanced secondary caregiver leave. The paternity leave is of 3 weeks with full pay and benefits is provided to all male employees in the company. This leave can be availed as one leave of 3 weeks or in weeklong increments (3 instalments) within twelve months of the employee becoming a father. It also has expanded daycare support, explicitly including same-sex partners in all policies. HUL’s approach is to acknowledge evolving family structures and enable “*equal parenting*” so that women are not left as sole caregivers.

- **Other Notables:** Many other companies have progressively improved their parental leave:
 - **KPMG India** uses a primary caregiver model (aligned with its global policy), reportedly offering around 26 weeks for the primary caregiver, regardless of gender, and shorter leave of 20 days for the secondary caregiver, aiming for gender neutrality in their benefits²³.
 - **Razorpay** and **OKCredit** (fintech startups) have extended paternity leave well beyond the traditional 2-week norm, reportedly offering 30 days and 8 weeks respectively to new fathers²⁴.
 - **Twilio** (tech MNC with India presence) offers new fathers 12 weeks off.²⁵
 - **Wipro** and **TCS**, two IT giants, have also updated their policies in the past few years – Wipro expanded paternity leave to 8 weeks, and TCS offers around 15 days with indications of further increase²⁶ (though these remain less extensive than the leaders above).

Collectively, these examples show a clear pattern. Major employers in India are voluntarily going beyond statutory requirements to make parental leave more inclusive and gender-neutral. Policies vary in length from a few weeks to six months but the common thread is recognizing fathers/partners as caregivers too. Many policies explicitly cover non-traditional scenarios like adoption, surrogacy, and same-sex partners, reflecting a broader definition of “parent.” Companies are also rebranding leave policies with neutral terminology e.g. using “parental leave”, “partner leave”, or “primary/secondary caregiver leave” instead of “maternity” and “paternity” – to signal that benefits are not tied to one’s gender. Such pioneering policies by large multinationals, Indian corporates, and nimble startups alike have set new benchmarks in the Indian workplace.

Employee Uptake and Workplace Culture

Implementing a policy is one thing; getting employees (especially men) to utilize it is another. The uptake of paternity or secondary caregiver leave in India has historically been low even when offered. Cultural norms and workplace pressures often dissuade men from taking extended leave for childcare. Years of gendered norms have cast childcare as a woman’s responsibility so when men step in, they often face judgment for stepping out of line. Indeed, corporate leaders note that even in companies granting generous paternity leave, men often take only a fraction of the permitted days. For example, an internal study of the “100 Best Companies for Women” found that while almost all provided paid paternity leave, the actual number of days men used was still minimal on average²⁷.

Several **barriers** contribute to this low uptake:

- **Traditional gender role perceptions:** Prevailing societal and cultural norms in India significantly influence the apprehension surrounding men availing themselves of parental leave. Traditionally entrenched gender roles often designate childcare as the primary responsibility of women, while men are predominantly viewed as the primary breadwinners²⁸. This ingrained perception can lead to a social stigma where men taking extended leave for childcare might be seen as deviating from expected masculine roles or being less committed to their professional duties²⁹.
- **Work pressures and career concerns:** A 2022 study found that among Indian corporate employees who believed men would be unwilling to take paternity leave, “39% have stated that men are not willing to take a leave as they are apprehensive of the reaction they will get from their employer, and 64.4% have stated that men are scared of losing their promotions or any performance bonus”³⁰.
- **Lack of managerial support:** If leadership doesn’t actively encourage men to take parental leave, employees may

interpret that the policy is a token gesture. Conversely, visible support from managers and senior executives can normalize it. In companies where top male leaders took paternity leave, junior employees felt more confident doing so.

- **Small business constraints:** In smaller firms or teams, losing any member (regardless of gender) for months can strain operations. The implementation of parental leave policies can pose challenges for businesses, particularly if multiple employees within the same team take leave concurrently, potentially affecting "business, finances, and resources"³¹.

Encouragingly, attitudes are slowly changing. As more companies adopt these policies and publicize success stories, acceptance is growing. Younger male employees, in particular, express a desire to be active fathers. HR leaders observe that "new-age fathers want to play an equal role in parenting" and are increasingly requesting paternity leave when it's available³². Progressive organizations are tackling the stigma by *fostering a supportive culture*: for instance, some have employee resource groups for new parents, mentorship programs, or peer networks that openly discuss taking leave. In one company, managers preemptively discuss workload planning with expectant fathers and assure them their jobs will be secure upon return. Educational efforts are also key – companies like Progress and MassMutual India report that they educate teams about the importance of fathers taking leave and even offer counseling to expectant dads on how to manage the transition³³.

Moreover, as more fathers take leave and share their experiences, a positive feedback loop can emerge. Men who have taken paternity leave often become advocates, telling colleagues that it improved their family life without ruining their careers. Such stories help normalize the practice. In sum, uptake remains a challenge due to deep-rooted cultural factors, but with concerted efforts, clear management support, advanced planning to cover workloads, and communication that taking leave won't penalize

one's career, companies are beginning to see higher utilization of these benefits. Overcoming the inertia requires careful planning, education, and support from management and team members, but the trajectory is towards greater acceptance of men as equal caregivers in the workplace.

Legal and Policy Evolution in India

The evolution of parental leave in India's policy landscape provides important context. Indian law today mandates extensive maternity leave but no equivalent paternity leave in the private sector. Under the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (amended in 2017), female employees are entitled to 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for the first two children (and 12 weeks for subsequent children)³⁴. The 2017 amendment also introduced 12 weeks of leave for women who legally adopt an infant (under 3 months old) or have a child via surrogacy (as a commissioning mother). These changes were a significant step to bolster women's workforce participation and align with global standards for maternity protection. However, the law does not recognize any leave for new fathers in the private sector. Only central government employees are statutorily allowed *15 days* of paternity leave within six months of childbirth, per civil service rules³⁵. In the absence of a legal mandate, paternity leave in private companies has been at employers' discretion – leading to the patchwork of minimal policies (or none at all) until recent years.

Recognizing this gap, lawmakers have made attempts at reform. In 2017, following the maternity leave extension, a Private Member's Bill – the Paternity Benefit Bill, 2017 was introduced in Parliament by MP Rajeev Satav³⁶. This Bill sought to create a gender-neutral framework for parental leave, proposing 15 days of paid paternity leave for all working men (in government and private sectors alike), with coverage even for adoptive fathers and those in the unorganized sector. It included employment protections (no firing during paternity leave) and even a funding scheme for paternity benefits. However, the Bill did not advance into

law. A similar paternity leave bill was brought in 2018/2019 by other members, aiming to legislate fathers' leave, but as of 2025, India still has no general statute mandating paternity leave in the private sector. The common government stance was that maternity leave addresses a biological recovery need, whereas fathers, not undergoing childbirth, were seen as not requiring mandated leave – an argument increasingly considered outdated³⁷.

While national law stagnated, some judicial and state-level developments signaled progress. There are a few states in India³⁸ which have formulated specific provisions regarding paternity leave. In 2017, the state of Maharashtra announced that the male employees who are widowers or whose spouses are bedridden thus unable to care for their children are entitled to avail a special 180-day leave until the child reaches the age of 18. This leave can be granted for two months per year in three separate intervals. However, this provision is applicable exclusively to the public sector.

Kerala grants a paternity leave of 10 days each for two children to its government male employees “at the time of delivery of his wife.” Furthermore, according to section 103a of the Rajasthan service rules, 1951, male government employees are eligible for paternity leave of 15 days which can be granted up to a maximum of two times.

In July 2023, chief minister of Sikkim announced one month paternity leave to its male government employees, and similar provisions are implemented by the state of West Bengal in 2016. In June 2023, Karnataka government made single male parents eligible for a 6 months paternity leave.

Indian courts have, in a series of cases, interpreted maternity benefits in a “*child-centric*” way rather than limiting them to the mother’s physical recovery. For instance, High Courts have ruled that even a mother by surrogacy is entitled to the full 180-day leave, emphasizing the child’s need for bonding. Such judgments implicitly bolster the logic for paternity leave by recognizing that parental presence (not just maternity recovery) is key to child welfare. In

2023, the state government of Uttarakhand made a pioneering move by granting 180 days of leave to single male employees who adopt a child under one year old, treating them on par with mothers. The state also extended a 15-day paternity leave to contract male workers, aligning with central government norms³⁹. These developments, albeit limited, reflect a growing acknowledgment in the public sphere that fathers too need time to care for newborns.

Against this backdrop, many Indian corporates have voluntarily gone beyond statutory mandates to bridge the gap:

- **Extended paternity leave:** Dozens of companies now offer paternity or secondary caregiver leave ranging from 2 weeks to several months (as detailed in the previous section) despite no legal requirement. This corporate activism has effectively created a parallel standard in the organized sector.
- **Primary caregiver concept:** Some employers have a primary caregiver leave, often equal to maternity leave (around 24–26 weeks), which can be claimed by any parent who is the main carer, regardless of gender. Deutsche Bank India, for example, allows a male employee to take the full 6-month leave if he is the primary caregiver, just as a new mother would⁴⁰. This approach aligns leave with caregiving role rather than sex.
- **Adoption and surrogacy coverage:** Many companies explicitly provide adoption leave for fathers and mothers alike, and leave for commissioning parents in surrogacy cases, even though the law only provides for adoptive mothers. Standard Chartered’s new policy, for instance, covers “*how a child comes to the family*” (birth, adoption, etc.) for any employee. Diageo and HUL also cover non-biological parenthood scenarios in a gender-neutral way.
- **Same-sex partners:** While Indian law does not yet recognize same-sex mar-

riages or parenting, a few companies proactively include same-sex partners in parental leave eligibility. Hindustan Unilever confirmed that all its parental policies are gender-neutral and “*same-sex partners are included wherever applicable*”⁴¹. This means an LGBTQ employee who becomes a parent (say through adoption or surrogacy) would get the same leave as any other parent, a policy stance ahead of current legal frameworks in India.

In summary, the legal evolution in India has expanded mothers’ rights but left fathers largely dependent on employers’ benevolence. Forward-thinking companies have stepped up to fill this void, crafting policies that treat parenting as a shared endeavor. These corporate policies often surpass what the law requires – for example, offering paternity benefits where none are mandated, or giving adoptive fathers the same leave as birth mothers, etc. There is a clear trend of corporates not only complying with the Maternity Act (26 weeks for women) but also voluntarily extending significant benefits to the other parent, driven by internal values and global best practices rather than domestic law. Policymakers and activists continue to debate legislating paternity leave nationally; until that happens, the private sector’s role remains crucial in setting precedents for gender-neutral parental support.

Impact on Equity, Retention, and Inclusion

Gender-neutral parental leave policies are more than just a “perk” – they have far-reaching implications for workplace equality, talent retention, and inclusion:

- **Advancing gender equity:** When both mothers and fathers can take substantial leave, the *burden* (and privilege) of childcare is more equally shared. This can mitigate the so-called “motherhood penalty” on women’s careers. In many Indian companies, women’s career trajectories suffer after childbirth due to extended breaks and assumptions that

they will be less committed. If men take comparable leave, employers are less likely to view new mothers as uniquely “risky” hires or employees. As one HR expert noted, generous parental leave for both parents helps “*level the playing field for working mothers*” and can reduce gender pay gaps over time by allowing women to maintain career momentum⁴². In countries with high female workforce participation, such as in Scandinavia, “*equal parenting plays a big role*” in enabling women to remain in the workforce. Indian companies hope to replicate this effect – by encouraging fathers to be active parents, women may face fewer expectations to sacrifice their jobs. Over time, this cultural shift could erode deep-rooted biases and promote true gender equality at work and home.

- **Retention and talent attraction:** Offering robust parental leave can significantly improve employee retention. Many women in corporate India drop out of the workforce after childbirth due to inadequate support. If their spouses or partners have leave as well, it eases the pressure on the mother to be the sole caregiver or to quit. Additionally, women are more likely to return to work and stay with an employer if they feel supported through policies like flexible rejoining programs and the knowledge that their partner also had workplace support. For men, being granted paternity leave can increase loyalty to the company – they see that the organization values their family life. Several companies report that these policies “*help recognise organizations as good places to work*”, enhancing their employer brand. This can be a differentiator in competitive talent markets. Millennials and Gen Z employees often consider a company’s stance on work-life balance and inclusion when choosing jobs; gender-neutral leave is increasingly part of that equation. In a tight labor market for skilled professionals, companies like those in tech

and consulting use such benefits to attract diverse talent and position themselves as progressive employers.

- **Reduced turnover costs:** Replacing employees is expensive. By preventing premature resignations of new parents, companies save on rehiring and retraining costs. Mercer India's analysis suggests that liberal parental leave policies yield positive economic benefits via reduced turnover and higher productivity in the long run. Employees come back more engaged and grateful, which can offset the short-term cost of their absence. Especially in high-skill sectors, retaining trained employees through life changes is far more cost-effective than losing them and hiring afresh.
- **Inclusive workplace culture:** Gender-neutral policies contribute to a culture of inclusion and acceptance. They send a strong message that the company supports all kinds of families and does not stereotype employees' roles at work or at home. This is important not just for gender inclusion but also for LGBTQ+ inclusion⁴³ – employees in same-sex relationships or those planning non-traditional parenthood see that they too will be supported. The policies discussed often explicitly mention LGBTQIA+ parents as beneficiaries. Such inclusivity can improve morale and a sense of belonging among employees who might otherwise feel marginalized. Moreover, when male leaders take parental leave, it sets an example that taking time for family is acceptable, thereby humanizing the workplace. In the long term, normalizing paternal involvement can chip away at toxic work cultures that expect employees (especially men) to prioritize work above all. Instead, both men and women can feel freer to utilize benefits and arrange their work-life balance without stigma.
- **Improved child and family outcomes:** Although the focus of this review is workplace impact, it's worth noting that

from a broader social perspective, enabling fathers to spend more time with newborns has positive effects on child development and family health. Studies globally have shown improved cognitive and emotional outcomes for children who have close contact with both parents in early life⁴⁴. For mothers, a partner's leave means support during the critical postnatal period, reducing stress and health risks. Employees who know their family is well-cared-for are likely to return to work less distracted and more focused. These indirect benefits reinforce why companies see long-term value in such policies.

In essence, gender-neutral parental leave is a key lever for creating a more equitable and inclusive workplace. It challenges the old norm that only women take care of infants, thus gradually eroding the bias that has limited women's careers. By doing so, it can increase female retention and advancement, promote a culture of shared responsibility, and position companies as forward-thinking. As one Mercer consultant put it⁴⁵, these policies show that an organization "*has a responsibility in bringing about social change*" so that no parent has to suffer professionally for embracing their role at home. Indian companies that have embraced this philosophy are not just doing the right thing ethically; they are also likely to see tangible business benefits in loyalty, engagement, and employer reputation.

Global comparisons: India and the World

While Indian private-sector initiatives are accelerating, it's useful to compare with global benchmarks to gauge how far India has come and what gaps remain. India's statutory framework (26 weeks maternity, 0 weeks paternity in private sector) is a mixed bag in global terms – extremely generous for mothers in duration, but severely lacking for fathers. Japan leads the world in this regard; it is the only country that offers at least six months' paternity leave at full pay for new fathers⁴⁶. Many countries have shorter maternity leaves but mandate some pa-

ternity leave or shared parental leave. For instance, the UK by law provides about 2 weeks paid paternity leave and allows sharing of parental leave up to 50 weeks, and most EU countries have between 1 to 4 weeks of paid paternity leave for fathers as a minimum. Some countries go much further: Nordic nations are famed for their egalitarian parental leaves (e.g. Sweden and Norway give months of paid leave to each parent, with portions reserved exclusively for fathers to encourage uptake). This has corresponded with high female employment rates and more balanced caregiving. It's this model that Indian executives often cite – “*In Scandinavian countries, high women's employment, and equal parenting plays a big role in this*” to build the case for similar practices here.

Global corporate policies in many multinational companies have also outpaced Indian norms. For example, companies like Aviva (UK) and Spotify implemented 6 months fully paid leave for all parents years ago, and IKEA, Goldman Sachs, IBM and others have introduced gender-neutral parental leave in various countries since the mid-2010s. The People Matters report notes that since 2016, a number of international companies (Aviva, Bain & Company, Diageo, Vodafone, etc.) have adopted equal parental leave policies. Indian subsidiaries of some of these firms (e.g. Diageo, Novartis, Deloitte) often brought those global policies into the Indian context, becoming pioneers locally. In fact, some policies in India's private sector today – such as Novartis's 26-week leave or LinkedIn's global parental leave – are on par with the best in the world. However, on average, Indian companies are still catching up. A 2022 analysis showed that even among large U.S. companies, only 43% offered equal paid leave to all parents (the rest giving mothers more than fathers)⁴⁷. Indian firms, starting from a more unequal baseline, have a long road ahead. The progress in India has so far been driven by forward-looking firms rather than legislation, whereas in many countries (especially Europe), government mandates set a baseline for everyone.

One area where Indian policy is notably behind is government support for paternity leave. Countries like Japan and South Korea now

legally allow over a year of leave for fathers (though uptake is improving slowly), and nearer home, even countries like Bangladesh and Indonesia introduced some days of paternity leave by law in recent years. India's lack of a national paternity leave law puts it in an unenviable club (along with the US which also lacks federal paid parental leave for fathers). This means the onus is on employers. The best Indian companies measure up well globally – e.g., offering 12–26 weeks for fathers is world-class – but many other employers still offer far less. The global trend clearly is toward *longer and gender-neutral parental leave* as a standard for developed workplaces. To stay competitive internationally and to support talent mobility, more Indian employers may need to match those benchmarks. The influence of multinational culture in India's tech and services sectors has helped drive change, and we see Indian startups (like Meesho, Zomato) eager to be seen as globally progressive by mirroring or even exceeding Western companies' policies.

Over the past 50 years, the average number of maternity leave days in 2024 has nearly doubled from 1971, from 63 to 107 in Global Gender Gap Index countries. In the same sample, average paternity leave has increased from less than half a day (0.2) to over 9 days⁴⁸.

In summary, compared to global standards, India's private sector has pockets of excellence in parental leave but also a large variance. The leaders are on par with the most progressive global companies, implementing 3–6 month gender-neutral leaves. The laggards still stick to the old model of long leave for mothers and minimal for fathers. Culturally, the notion of fathers taking long leave is still more novel in India than in much of Europe. The trajectory, however, is converging with global norms, as both international and homegrown companies in India realize that to be “*best in class*” employers, equitable parental leave is a must. Indian policies also increasingly incorporate global best practices like flexibility in taking leave, phasing return to work (e.g., half-day options), and providing coaching for returning parents – these mirror policies in North America or Europe. As global conversations around parental leave shift towards inclusivity (for ex-

ample, talking of “birthing parent” and “non-birthing parent” rather than mother/father), Indian companies are also adapting their language and schemes. The primary focus remains on India in this review, but these global comparisons highlight that the push for gender-neutral parental leave is a worldwide movement, and India is an active part of it, though with its unique challenges.

Emerging best practices and conclusion

The evolving landscape of parental leave in the Indian private sector reveals several emerging best practices that other organizations can emulate. Companies pioneering in this space tend to adopt a holistic approach, combining policy design with cultural change initiatives. Below is a summary of best practices that are gaining traction in India:

- **Adopt a primary/secondary caregiver model:** Rather than tying leave to the employee’s gender, leading firms designate a *primary caregiver leave* (often 20–26 weeks) and a *secondary caregiver leave* (perhaps 2–8 weeks). This model is inherently gender-neutral – whichever partner assumes the primary caregiving role can take the longer leave. This flexibility accommodates diverse family needs (e.g. if the mother is unwell or the father wants to be the at-home parent). Many companies (from Deutsche Bank to Volvo and Accenture) have implemented this, thereby removing gender bias in policy wording. It’s considered a best practice as it focuses on the role, not the sex, of the parent.
- **Equalize leave durations as much as possible:** The most progressive organizations are moving toward parity in leave duration for both parents. While not every company can immediately jump to 26 weeks for all (like Zomato or Novartis did), a best practice is to substantially increase paternity/partner leave so that it’s within the same order of magnitude as maternity leave. Standard Chartered’s 20 weeks vs 26 weeks for mothers is a good example of narrowing the gap. The closer the durations, the more normalized it becomes for either parent to be the one taking time off, which supports true choice and shared responsibility.
- **Inclusive definitions (birth, adoption, surrogacy, LGBTQ+):** A cornerstone of leading policies is that they cover all routes to parenthood and all types of parents. This means including adoptive parents, commissioning parents (in surrogacy arrangements), and same-sex partners. HUL and Diageo’s policies explicitly mention these categories. Additionally, terms like “spouse or partner” are used to include unmarried partners who may be co-parenting. By making the policy language inclusive, companies ensure no one falls through the cracks and signal that every family configuration is respected.
- **Encourage and normalize uptake:** Best-practice companies don’t just offer leave on paper; they actively encourage employees to use it. This includes leadership advocacy – for instance, male leaders announcing they will take paternity leave sets a powerful example. Some companies celebrate new parents in internal communications and remind fathers that taking leave is both acceptable and expected. Practical support like robust handover processes, cross-training team members, and adjusting performance goals for the year of leave can alleviate the work-related anxiety of taking time off. The emerging norm is that managers should proactively plan for parental leaves (for any gender) just as they would for maternity, rather than treating paternal leave as exceptional.
- **Post-leave support:** Another best practice is aiding employees in their return to work after a long leave. Many companies now offer flexible return programs – e.g., the option to work part-

time or from home for a few weeks, or a gradual ramp-up of responsibilities. On-site or subsidized childcare (creche) facilities, if provided, are a huge enabler for new parents returning to work and are increasingly part of the benefits package at family-friendly employers. Several firms also provide “buddy” or mentorship programs for returning parents (both mothers and fathers) to help them readjust and catch up on any workplace changes during their absence.

- **Sensitization and training:** To truly foster an inclusive atmosphere, best-in-class organizations conduct training and workshops about unconscious bias and the importance of equal parenting. For example, HR teams at some companies train managers on how to handle parental leave requests without bias, ensuring a father’s leave is approved and supported just as a mother’s would be. They also sensitise coworkers to refrain from negative remarks (like calling a dad “vacationing” if he takes parental leave). This goes hand-in-hand with broader diversity training.
- **Monitoring and metrics:** Lastly, progressive companies treat their parental leave policies as evolving. They track utilization rates, gather feedback from employees who took the leave, and adjust accordingly. Monitoring uptake by gender can reveal if men are hesitating to use the leave, prompting further action. Some companies even set *internal targets* to increase paternity leave utilization (echoing how certain countries set usage targets for fathers). By measuring outcomes such as retention of new parents, employee satisfaction

scores, etc. companies build the business case to continue or expand these initiatives.

In conclusion, the Indian private sector’s journey toward gender-neutral parental leave is well underway, propelled by a mix of global influence, visionary business leaders, and the pressing need to keep women in the workforce. We now see a spectrum of policies, with a growing number of companies at the forefront demonstrating that equalizing parental leave is not only possible but beneficial. These policies promote a more equitable division of childcare, helping to chip away at gender stereotypes that have long pervaded both the workplace and home. Early evidence and expert commentary suggest that companies embracing such inclusive policies enjoy better retention of talent, higher morale, and a reputation as employers of choice.

That said, challenges remain. Many organizations have yet to extend meaningful leave to fathers, and societal attitudes can be slow to change. But the momentum is clear: gender-neutral and caregiver-centric leave policies represent emerging best practice in India, aligning with international trends and the aspirations of a new generation of workers. As more success stories emerge and as perhaps future legislation catches up, one can expect these policies to become standard across Corporate India. Ultimately, the goal is a workplace where leave for a new baby is seen not as “maternity” or “paternity” leave, but simply *parental leave*, a natural, supported pause for any new parent to care for their child. Achieving this will be a significant milestone in India’s journey toward workplace equality and inclusion, fostering an environment where both women and men can thrive in their careers while nurturing their families.

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