

# DFA

Dalhousie Faculty Association

## Blog

*Catrina Brown is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work, with cross appointments in Women's Studies, Graduate Studies and Nursing*

“Article 30: Vacations, Holidays and Leaves”

Since 2001 I have advocated for changes in the Parental Leave clauses within the Collective Agreement. With the current negotiations we need to achieve harmonization of leaves in Article 30.08b related to paternity and adoption leave. As it stands now, women who give birth have longer leaves than people who adopt. Is there merit in the difference?

I am the sole parent of two adopted daughters. The first time I became a mother was like getting hit over the head with a two-by-four, as I became a new parent through international adoption. That meant I had to deal with the newness of parenthood while suffering jetlag, dealing with a different culture and not speaking the language, and living in a hotel without the comforts of home. As it turned out, I either had food poisoning or some bad kind of bug because I was sick the whole time. The second night in China, I remember rocking my baby while both of us cried. For the first time, I wondered can I really do this? Stumbling around the hotel room I made up a bottle, ensuring everything was properly sterilized with boiling water as the water was not drinkable. Malnourished, and afflicted with dysentery and scabies, as I would soon learn, my new daughter was eager and grateful for every bottle. At 14 months she weighed 14 pounds and was floppy when she sat up, often toppling over. She had never had solid food, and didn't know how to chew.

All women face overwhelmingly new, equally frightening and exciting experience of being a new mother whether they give birth or not. And certainly, in the case of adoption issues of attachment can become more complicated for various medical, emotional or social reasons. Most of the time, similarities far exceed distinctions between birth mothers and adoptive mothers. So why is it assumed that when mothers give birth versus mothers/parents who adopt that they and their child need more time for leaves? As can be seen from my own story, there is an immeasurable amount of adjustment whether a birthing or adoptive mother.

Surely, in 2011, out-of-date assumptions about family roles and structure need to be replaced by the realities of faculty attempting to achieve a positive work/life balance. The traditional model of the family, which centers on men financially supporting their families while women are engaged in caring work in the home, is not realistic and disadvantages adoptive, sole parents and GLBTQ families

Women are having children later as they pursue advanced education; particularly relevant in the academic world. Women may wait until they have completed their doctorate and have a tenure track job before having a child and sometimes find themselves in their late 30's or 40's. More likely to face fertility issues, these women may turn to adoption.

At first glance, Canada's Employment Insurance (EI) appears to allow parity in parental leaves with nearly one full year of support for everyone. However, the maximum monthly payment is approximately \$1,600. It doesn't take an economist to see that unless you have another salary (the breadwinner model) or are topped up by your employer, EI benefits do not provide adequate support and forces people back to work before their child or they are ready.

As a sole parent, with my first child I relied on accrued vacation leave, rather than parental benefits. With my second, although the top-up period was longer, I still returned before I wanted to.

Strong workplace top-up in this university would demonstrate support for a more equitable approach to parenting leaves and leadership in equity issues. The existing collective agreement needs to be amended to reflect the needs and the actual lives of all parents and children by harmonizing benefits.