

Parental Leave as a Potential Demographic Policy Instrument in Russia: Mixed-Methods Research

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Abstract: In many countries, parental leave is an effective demographic policy measure. Its regulation is considered an important determinant of the birth rate. In Russia, the parental leave system is not flexible; however, the legislation provides for one of the longest parental leave in the world—36 months. According to a popular stereotype in Russia, as parental leave is longer than in other countries, there is no need to debate its effectiveness. This very reason may explain a lack of parental leave research in Russia. Our paper aims to demonstrate how mixed-methods research can be applied to study parental leave in Russia. In 2021, to analyse the problem in the Sverdlovsk Region (one of the largest), we did the following: 1) surveyed 500 parents with both children under the age of 12 and currently living parents (i.e., grandparents); 2) surveyed 500 grandparents with grandchildren under the age of 12. In both surveys, we used river sample. To increase the randomness of the sample, we recruited respondents using multiple channels and sampled them with equal probability into the population analysed; 3) conducted focus groups with parents having both children under the age of 12 and currently living parents and with grandparents having grandchildren under the age of 12. Our mixed-methods research yielded the following results. 1. The parents surveyed view mothers as primary leave-takers. They also refer to grandmothers (most often, maternal ones) and fathers as potential leave-takers. 2. Grandparents' opinions on leave-takers are also diverse; their responses vary as much as parents' ones. However, they are more restraint in terms of their own role as potential leave-takers. 3. As focus groups revealed, "if a need arises", parents are willing to delegate the right for parental leave to grandparents, who agree to take it. Our methodology is based on the mixed-methods research strategy. It allowed us to identify social attitudes towards the existing parental leave system in Russia and to draw attention to its transformation. The results may be of use when developing new mechanisms for the Russian state demographic policy.

Keywords: Demographic policy, parental leave, mixed-methods research, grandparents, parents

1. Introduction

In many countries, parental leave is an effective demographic policy measure. Its regulation is viewed as one of the most important birth rate determinants. The increasing number of parental leave studies (Moss et al, 2019; Meil et al, 2019; Kurowska, 2019; Koslowski, 2019) proves that the topic has a scientific and practical relevance. Closer attention is traditionally paid to maternal leave and its influence on the women's professional self-realisation (Bartoš and Pertold-Gebicka, 2018; Wood and Neels, 2019). At the same time, researchers more and more often explore fatherhood and paternal leave (Duvander and Johansson, 2012; Gíslason and Eydal, 2011; Lappegård, 2008; Rostgaard and Lausten, 2014).

To enhance demographic policies, many countries introduced additional elements in parental leave systems for increasing their flexibility—an opportunity to use parental leave by other relatives of the child, to choose shorter leave with higher payments and vice versa, to use parental leave by both spouses simultaneously, and others.

In Russia, the parental leave system is not flexible; however, the legislation provides for one of the longest parental leave in the world—36 months. According to a popular stereotype in the country, there is no need to debate the parental leave effectiveness as it is longer than in any other country. This mentality may explain a lack of parental leave research in Russia.

A recent negative birth rate dynamic in Russia also contributes to the urgency of studying parental leave as a potential demographic policy measure. Despite various support measures for families and parents, the Total Fertility Rate has consistently declined. In 2015, it accounted for 1.777, whereas in 2019–2020 it fell to 1.505.

The study aims to demonstrate how parental leave in Russia may be studied through mixed-methods research and to bring attention to the long-delayed transformation of the parental leave system in Russia.

There are at least two reasons why a strategy based on mixed-methods research was chosen. Firstly, it is known that using both qualitative and quantitative data help avoid drawbacks of each of these methods and arrive at a more thorough understanding of the research question (Johnson, 2008). Among these drawbacks, which are

compensated by using mixed-methods research, are the following: for qualitative methods – providing limited generalisability and only soft data, studying few people, being highly subjective, minimising the use of researcher's expertise due to the reliance on participants; for quantitative methods – being impersonal and dry, not recording participants' words, providing limited understanding of the context of participants, being largely researcher-driven (Creswell, 2014).

Secondly, mixed-methods research is used in demographic studies quite infrequently because the major method for exploring demographic processes is statistical analysis. The attempt to adopt mixed-methods research is due to the fact that parental leave in Russia has almost not been studied, and the methodology is yet to be designed. In this context, using mixed-methods research may be considered a pilot project, which will show whether it is appropriate or inappropriate for further studies.

2. Data and Methods

To design this research, there was chosen convergent design, which presupposes conducting qualitative and quantitative studies simultaneously. As each of these methods yields specific results (qualitative data reveal major trends, quantitative data find underlying causes of processes and phenomena), their combination allows approaching the problem from different perspectives (Creswell, 2014). Figure 1 schematises convergent design applied to this study.

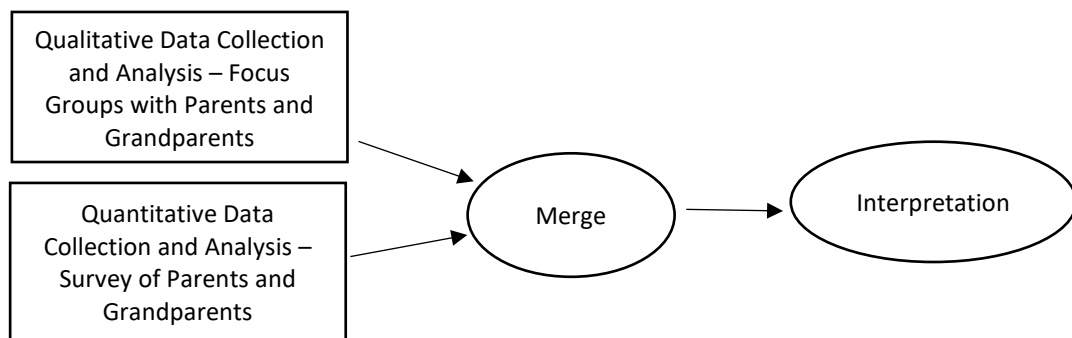


Figure 1: Convergent Design for Studying Parental Leave as a Potential Demographic Policy Instrument in Russia

The study used data from a series of sociological studies carried out in the Sverdlovsk Region (one of the largest Russian regions) in 2021:

1. a survey of 500 parents with both children under the age of 12 and currently living parents (i.e., grandparents);
2. a survey of 500 grandparents with grandchildren under the age of 12.

The study used river sample, and the questionnaire was posted on several websites, which ensured the maximum coverage of the target population; these are websites of regional mass media and social media communities. To distribute the questionnaire, public organisations, which work with families, parents, and children, were referred to. There were collected 563 responses from parents and 547 responses from grandparents. Further, there were randomly chosen 500 responses in each category, which allowed increasing the randomness of the river sample.

For the analysis, there were chosen questions aimed at studying parents' and grandparents' opinions on potential leave-takers for their subsequent children/grandchildren. These questions were formulated in the same way so that opinions among two generations of families from the Sverdlovsk Region could be compared. The question was: "You probably know that parental leave may be taken not only by mothers but also by other family members. Who would you entrust this right to in your family?" Respondents were offered up to three options.

While processing data from two surveys, the following procedures were used:

1. calculating the number of potential leave-takers, which is the number of options chosen for the question mentioned above. With the maximum number of options being three, respondents could also choose fewer answers (1, 2, or even 0);

2. combining databases of parents and grandparents for evaluating the significance of statistical differences between opinions on the number of potential leave-takers among two family generations.

For the analysis, there were used descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, correlation analysis with Spearman's, Cramér's V, and phi coefficients. To evaluate whether statistical differences are significant, the non-parametric Mann-Whitney and Kruskal–Wallis test were used. Data were processed and analysed through IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0.

Additionally, there were carried out focus groups with parents having children under the age of 12 and their currently living parents and/or those of the spouse (N=3) and with grandparents having grandchildren under the age of 12 (N=3); each focus group included from 5 to 8 participants. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all focus groups were conducted via Zoom video platform. Although this format of a group interview is unusual, it complied with the homogeneity principle; for each focus group, respondents of the similar age and social status were selected.

For the further analysis, there were chosen questions related to using parental leave within the family. In particular, grandmothers were asked the following question: "You probably know that parental leave may be taken not only by mothers but also by other family members. How would you feel if your family entrusted this right to you?" For parents, the question was reformulated: "If a need arose, who would you entrust the right for parental leave to among your family?"

The logic of the study is presented in Figure 1.

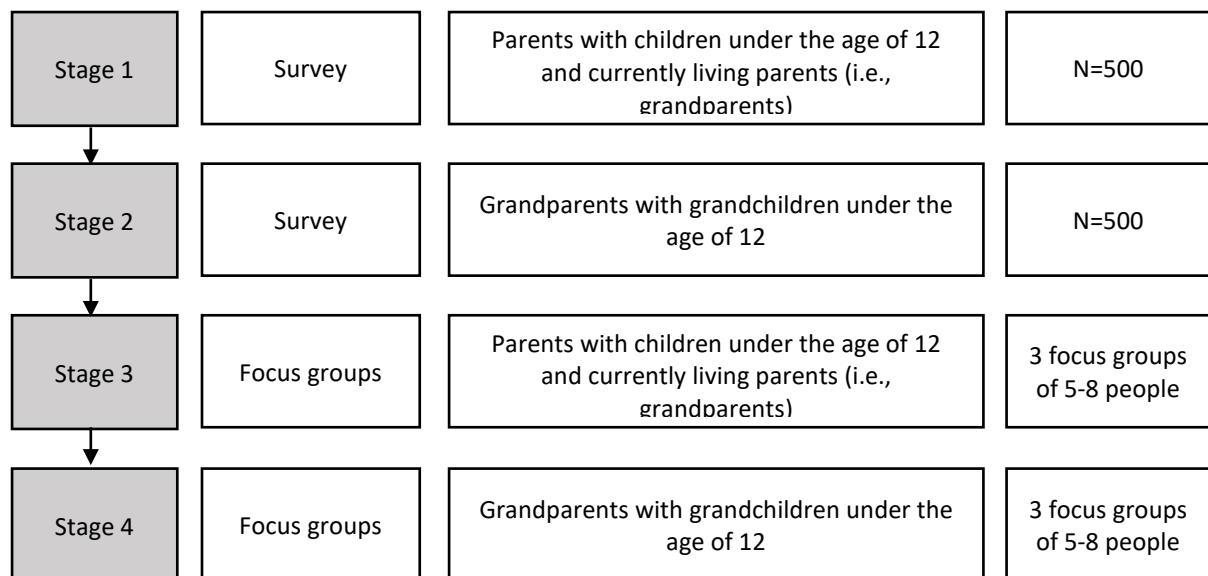


Figure 2: Logic of Parental Leave Study

3. Results

The sociological survey of parents and grandparents yielded the following results.

- Parents' opinions on potential leave-takers are diverse; they consider a mother as a primary leave-taker, and quite often they also mention a grandmother (especially maternal) and a father. Table 1 presents these data.

Table 1: Frequency of parents' choices of potential leave-takers

Potential leave-takers	Share of respondents, %
Mother	81.8
Father	34.0
Maternal grandmother	52.0
Paternal grandmother	13.8
Maternal grandfather	5.0
Paternal grandfather	1.4

Potential leave-takers	Share of respondents, %
Aunt	6.2
Uncle	0.2

In this case, respondents could choose up to 3 options; thus, the number of choices testifies to the diversity of parents' ideas on potential leave-takers in the family. Figure 3 presents the distribution of respondents according to the number of options chosen. Therefore, there is approximately an equal number of parents who rely on a wide, average, and narrow—which is normally limited to the mother and typical for Russia—circle of leave-takers.

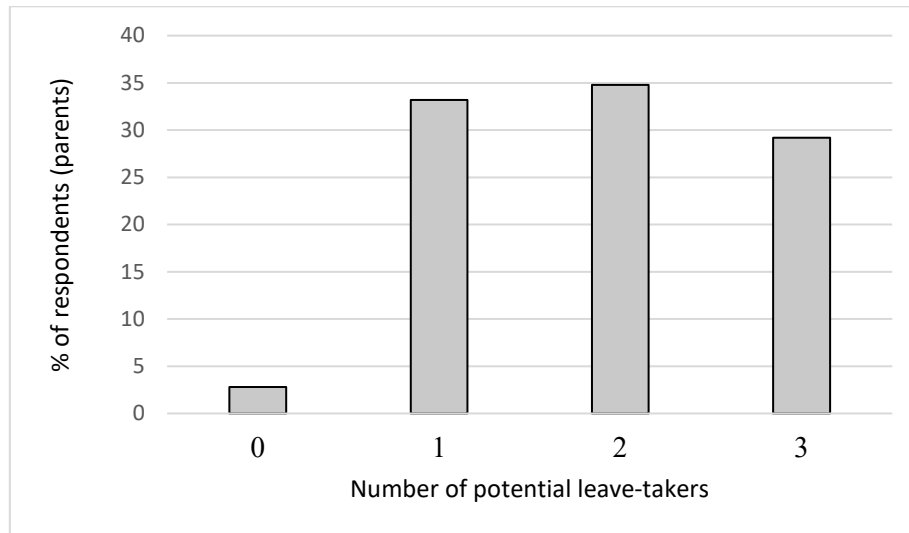


Figure 3: Parents' answers on the number of potential leave-takers

2. Grandparents' views on leave-takers are as much diverse; their answers range as much as parents' ones. However, grandparents less often choose themselves as potential leave-takers. For example, Table 2 shows that they consider a mother as a potential leave-taker more frequently than parents; therefore, they less frequently choose other relatives for this role. Most notably, there is a marked shift towards choosing just one potential leave-taker (a mother) (Figure 4).

Table 2: Frequency of grandparents' choices of potential leave-takers

Potential leave-takers	Share of respondents, %
Mother	92.8
Father	24.8
Maternal grandmother	36.0
Paternal grandmother	13.6
Maternal grandfather	2.8
Paternal grandfather	1.0
Aunt	1.8
Uncle	0.0

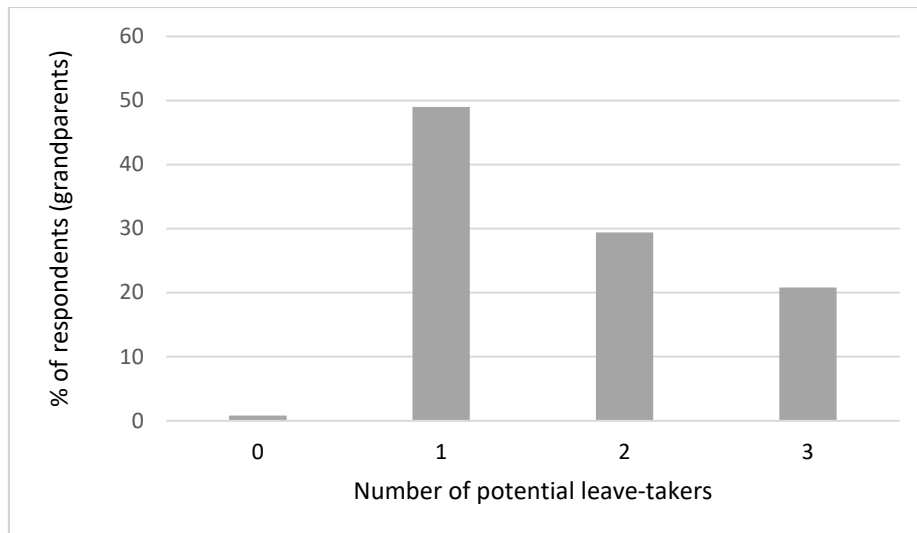


Figure 4: Grandparents' answers on the number of potential leave-takers

3. Based on the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U Test, there was analysed the significance of statistical differences between opinions on the number of potential leave-takers among two family generations. Results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Ranks for the variable "Number of potential leave-takers" (Mann-Whitney U Test)

Family generations	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Parents	500	535.60	267800.00
Grandparents	500	465.40	232700.00
Total	1000		

Table 4: Test Statistics for the variable "Number of potential leave-takers" (Mann-Whitney U Test)*

Statistics	Total points
Mann-Whitney U	107450.000
Wilcoxon W	232700.000
Z	-4.092
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000

* Grouping Variable: Family Generation

Table 5 compares descriptive statistics on parents and grandparents. Evidently, parents' views on the circle of potential leave-takers are more diverse than grandparents' ones.

Table 5: Statistics for the variable "Number of potential leave-takers"

Parents			Grandparents		
Number of potential leave-takers	%	Cumulative %	Number of potential leave-takers	%	Cumulative %
0	2.8	2.8	0	0.8	0.8
1	33.2	36.0	1	49.0	49.8
2	34.8	70.8	2	29.4	79.2
3	29.2	100.0	3	20.8	100.0
Total	100.0			100.0	
Mean	1.90			1.70	
Std. Dev.	0.853			0.802	
Median	2			2	
Mode	2			1	

The most prominent differences in views, which were statistically proved through comparing proportions of columns in crosstabs and significance of phi coefficients, are presented in Figure 5. It is apparent that more often grandparents attribute the role of the sole leave-taker to mothers and less often to fathers; they also regard

themselves as potential leave-takers much less frequently. The immediate circle, whose help may be used by parents, is much wider for parents as compared to grandparents.

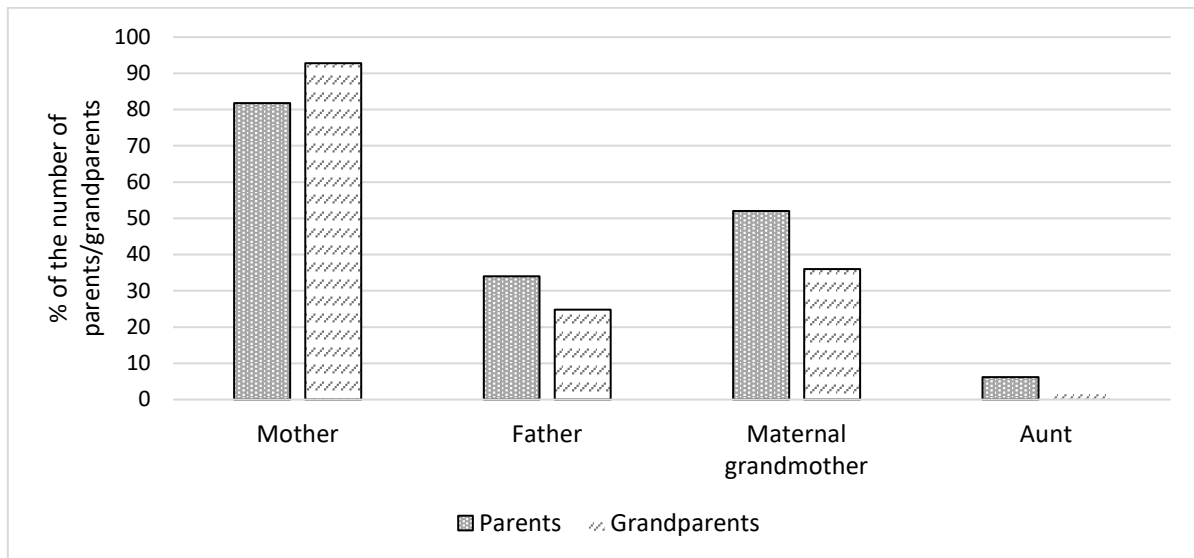


Figure 5: Statistically significant differences between opinions on leave-takers. Comparison of parents and grandparents

4. The correlation analysis based on parents' answers showed that the number of potential leave-takers was related to certain demographic characteristics of parents (Table 6). For example, the older parents are, the fewer the number of potential leave-takers. Additionally, the larger number of children also leads parents to rely on the narrower circle of actual helpers during parental leave. At the same time, Table 5 reports that there is no relationship between the number of potential leave-takers and parents' education, financial status, or gender.

Table 6: Correlations between the number of potential leave-takers and demographic characteristics of parents

Demographic characteristics	Correlation Coefficient	
	Value	Asymp.Sig
	Spearman's rho	
Age	-.089	.047
Number of children	-.155	.000
	Cramer's Coefficient	
Education	.038	.394
Financial status	.008	.856
Gender	.053	.235

5. The correlation analysis revealed that grandparents' views on the number of potential leave-takers were related to only one socio-demographic variable—their education (Table 7). Their age, the number of children and grandchildren, and any other objective socio-demographic characteristics proved not to be related to grandparents' ideas on the number of potential leave-takers.

Table 7: Correlations between the number of potential leave-takers and demographic characteristics of grandparents

Demographic characteristics	Correlation Coefficient	
	Value	Asymp.Sig
	Spearman's rho	
Age	-.053	.235
Number of children	-.014	.748
Number of grandchildren	.065	.145
	Cramer's Coefficient	
Education	.146	.006
Financial status	.087	.507
Gender	.057	.658

To explore the specificity of the relationship between the grandparents' level of education and the number of potential leave-takers, a non-parametric Kruskal Wallis Test was used. Results are shown in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8: Ranks for the variable “Number of potential leave-takers” (Kruskal Wallis Test)

Level of education	N	Mean Rank
Secondary general or lower	32	280.88
Vocational	166	231.68
Higher	302	257.63
Total	500	

Table 9: Test Statistics for the variable “Number of potential leave-takers” (Kruskal Wallis Test)*

Statistics	Total points
Chi-Square	5.856
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.050

* Grouping Variable: Education

Table 10 groups answers of grandparents according to their level of education. Most notably, conservative ideas (i.e., about a sole potential leave-taker) are mostly shared by those with vocational education (54.4%), less often by those with higher education (47.4%); among grandparents with the lower level of education this opinion is even less frequent (37.5%). Thus, grandparents with vocational education have more traditional beliefs, which is proved by another statistical measure—the median. (The mean in this case would not be a reliable characteristic of distribution because means are highly varied).

Table 10: Statistics for the variable “Number of potential leave-takers”

Secondary general or lower			Vocational			Higher		
Number of potential leave-takers	%	Cumulative %	Number of potential leave-takers	%	Cumulative %	Number of potential leave-takers	%	Cumulative %
0	0	0	0	1.2	1.2	0	0.7	0.7
1	37.5	37.5	1	55.4	56.6	1	46.7	47.4
2	37.5	75.0	2	26.5	83.1	2	30.1	77.5
3	25.0	100.0	3	16.9	100.0	3	22.5	100.0
Total	100.0			100.0			100.0	
Mean	1.88		1.59			1.75		
Std. Dev.	0.793		0.779			0.810		
Median	2		1			2		

6. Focus groups with parents allowed us to identify reasons why parental leave—despite parents having more diverse views on leave-takers than grandparents—is still predominantly taken by mothers. Firstly, it is widely believed that a mother plays a key role in taking care of a child, who needs her especially at earlier stages of the development. A mother, in turn, also needs her child because childcare gives her a gamut of positive emotions. Secondly, parents claim that children are their personal responsibility, which cannot be delegated to grandparents even as part of parental leave. Finally, many parents are not sure that grandparents would be able to handle childcare physically because of their age. In case of emergency, parents are still willing to delegate the right for parental leave to one of the grandparents—as a rule, to the maternal grandmother (Table 11).

Table 11: Parents' opinions on leave-takers

Leave-takers	Reasons for using parental leave	Codes
Mother	Child needs mother at earlier stages of development	<p>"I'm also conservative... Everything might happen, but <u>no one can do it better than a mother</u>. They feel these needs" (Andrey)</p> <p>"In this matter, I <u>hold more conservative views</u>. I think that <u>a mother is a big influence on her child</u>, specifically <u>at an early age</u>, when they breastfeed and change diapers..." (Dmitriy)</p>
	Mother needs to derive pleasure from motherhood	<p>"I <u>love babies so much</u>... That's why I <u>want to enjoy this period myself</u> because it's so short" (Oksana)</p> <p>"I also believe that <u>a baby should stay with a mother</u> because it's <u>the smell of the baby</u>, the way they smell, <u>these first breastfeeds</u>... <u>An amazing experience</u>" (Natalie)</p> <p>"Well, if possible, a baby should stay with a mother. <u>I wish all mothers this</u>" (Galina)</p> <p>"I also think <u>parental leave should be taken by mothers</u>. Otherwise, she will...it's my opinion, <u>she will stop being a mother</u> [laughing]. She has to be on parental leave, <u>love her child</u>, and <u>develop those warm feelings herself</u>" (Natalie)</p>
	Personal responsibility for children	<p>"I would definitely use it myself, for sure. It's like <u>an adult decision</u>, <u>you have to be held responsible for it</u>" (Anna)</p> <p>"Generally, I think that <u>your children are your duty</u>" (Michael)</p> <p>"Again, considering my today's state, <u>I'm independent</u>, so I <u>will not delegate it to anyone</u>" (Nadezhda)</p> <p>"Honestly, I wouldn't have delegated it because <u>my child was intelligent</u>, and I wouldn't have <u>given this right to anyone</u>" (Marina)</p>
	Social conventions	<p>"I support the idea that <u>a mother should be with a child</u>. If <u>there's time for that</u>, then it's the mother that should be with her child, not anyone else" (Anastacia)</p> <p>"Parental leave <u>should be taken by a mother herself</u>. I stayed with both of my children myself" (Julia)</p>
Maternal grandmother	Mother has trust in her mother	<p>"If <u>something extraordinary happened</u>, if I got sick, for example, I would <u>trust my mother</u> because <u>she knows how to treat children</u>" (Marina)</p> <p>"I would <u>put my mother first</u> because we have <u>more similarities in the way we communicate and bring up</u>. It's easier for me to ask her rather than my mother-in-law" (Oksana)</p> <p>"If I <u>was forced to choose</u>, it would definitely be my mother because <u>our values coincide more</u>. My child would be <u>in good hands</u>" (Marina)</p> <p>"There's no doubt, it would be <u>my mother</u>. But practically <u>she took this responsibility</u>. I woke up early and left for work, so she quitted her job and stayed with my elder daughter" (Olga)</p> <p>"I'm <u>certain</u> that <u>my mother will ensure the safety and health</u> of my children" (Galina)</p> <p>"I would <u>trust my mother</u>, of course. She is <u>the closest person I have and my friend</u>" (Marina)</p>
Paternal grandmother	Other family members are busy	<p>"I would probably delegate it to the grandmother because the father has a lot to learn [laughing]. To my mother-in-law because <u>my mother is still employed</u>" (Marina)</p>

7. Grandparents hold strongly conservative views. The majority of them claimed that they wouldn't have taken parental leave because, firstly, parents have to take responsibility for their children themselves, and secondly, a child in this period particularly needs mother's care. Similar to parents, grandparents believe that parental leave should be primarily—or, according to most of the answers, exclusively—taken by mothers (Table 12).

Table 12: Reasons why grandparents would not like to take parental leave

Reasons	Codes
Child needs mother	<p>"I think that <u>a mother herself should take leave</u> because it's only her who knows best what her child needs. <u>She is with her baby from the very first day, and the baby trusts the mother more</u>" (Irina)</p> <p>"I would say <u>a mother should take parental leave</u>. Everything you put in your child until they turn 5 is a foundation for future development. I guess <u>a child should be with a mother</u>. <u>She is the most important person</u>" (Alyona)</p>
Children are parents' own responsibility	<p>"<u>When parents are alive, it's weird</u> to switch like that" (Constantine)</p> <p>"I'm <u>strongly against it</u>. <u>Children must be brought up by parents</u>. I would never agree to that" (Alla)</p> <p>"My opinion is that <u>taking care of children is parents' responsibility</u>, not grandparents'. I mean being on parental leave and staying with children" (Luybov)</p>
Happiness from parenting	<p>"I also think that <u>children, especially babies, should be brought up by parents</u>. They have to <u>see their children grow up</u>. They can miss out on it, on everything that happens in their children's lives" (Svetlana)</p> <p>"<u>Parents have to take care of their children themselves</u>. That's what it has to be like, they have <u>to live that moment</u>, at least the first year" (Lyubov)</p> <p>"I'm strongly against it because <u>children should be first and foremost raised in the family</u>. It's crucial for a mother <u>to develop those parental feelings</u>" (Svetlana)</p>
Health	<p>"I would probably agree to it, but it could be <u>difficult for me because of my health condition</u>" (Rimma)</p>

8. Nevertheless, while holding focus groups, grandparents (as well as parents) reported that they would be ready to take the responsibility and use parental leave in case of emergency. The following are examples of grandparents' thoughts:

"Sure, if something tragic happens, grandparents will help; they will take care" (Konstantin).

"If it's necessary, you'll always be around for your daughter and definitely will use this right. You have to do what you have to do" (Valentina).

"If it was necessary, I would probably agree" (Tatyana).

"Basically, I babysit them, which allowed my daughter to work part-time. So I would probably be okay with that" (Nina).

4. Discussion

Results of several stages prove that Russian society is dominated by traditional views on childcare and parental leave usage. Quantitative results of the study demonstrated that both parents and grandparents tend to agree that childcare during parental leave is mostly a prerogative of mothers. In turn, qualitative results allowed identifying reasons behind this mentality. Among reasons, respondents provide child's needs and mother's needs to take care of her child. Additionally, both generations claim that it is necessary for parents themselves to be responsible for children meaning that a mother being on parental leave is a manifestation of that responsibility per se. Interestingly, a child's need for mother's care was mostly mentioned by men, whereas women reported that they would like to use the right themselves to experience the joy of motherhood.

Still, parents refer to other relatives of the child as potential leave-takers and do it more often than grandparents. In this context, the younger the family generation, the less conservative stereotypes.

When choosing potential leave-takers, parents more often prefer maternal grandmothers (not fathers, for example). In many European countries (e.g., Belgium, France, Sweden, Hungary, Norway, Estonia), paternal leave has been widely popular for decades (Koslowski et al.). Researchers claim that giving fathers a right for leave and engaging them in childcare aim to reduce stress for women while balancing family and work and to ensure gender equality.

Results show that, despite the Russian legislation provides for the same opportunity, even parents themselves quite rarely choose to take it. There is a popular opinion that women know best how to take care of a child. Respondents said the following in support of the idea:

"I would probably delegate it to the grandmother because the father has a lot to learn [laughing]" (Marina).

"I think that a woman would be more comfortable [with raising children], and it's clear for her" (Marina)

"If delegating it to the husband, I don't know, it seems unreal" (Svetlana).

According to results, conventions in Russian society do not allow the only element of flexibility in the parental leave system to function properly.

5. Conclusion

The study developed a methodology based on the mixed-methods research strategy. Results reveal the potential of applying this strategy to further studies of parental leave system as a potential instrument of the demographic policy. Quantitative results let us identify major social attitudes towards the existing parental leave system in Russia and bring attention to the urgency of its transformation. In particular, the range of parents' opinions on potential leave-takers is much wider than that of grandparents. Results also showed a negative correlation between parents' views and the number of children and parents' age—the younger parents are and the fewer children they have, the wider their circle of potential leave-takers. At the same time, grandparents are more conservative when it comes to the number of potential family members who can take parental leave and their opinion on who can potentially become a leave-taker (except the mother).

At the same time, qualitative results revealed fundamental causes of social attitudes towards leave-takers. Focus group results indicated that both parents and grandparents attributed a key role in childcare to the mother. They argue that a child needs mother's care, whereas a mother has to feel the pleasure of motherhood. It is also believed that having a child is a conscious decision; thus, it is a parent's duty to raise children, not grandparents' one. However, in case of emergency, parents are ready to delegate the right for parental leave to one of the grandparents (more often, to maternal grandmothers). Grandparents, in turn, are also ready to take parental leave if it is needed.

Results may lay the foundation for developing radically new mechanisms of the state demographic policy in Russia. However, to formulate specific plans for transforming parental leave, more profound research, which would focus on exploring the potential effectiveness of this measure for the Russian demographic policy, is needed.

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