

Anne Hathaway on Why She Became a U.N. Ambassador for Paid Parental Leave ^[1]

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Source: Motto

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Mar 2017

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

On International Women's day, Oscar-winner Anne Hathaway gave a speech at the United Nations calling on companies and countries around the world to offer paid parental leave. The United States offers 12 weeks of unpaid leave for mothers, a problem that took on new resonance for Hathaway when she gave birth to her first son last year. "Somehow we and every American parent were expected to be back to normal in under three months without income," she said in her speech.

Hathaway, who was named goodwill ambassador for the United Nations, emphasized that parental leave policies need to include men as well as women. "[We need to] redefine and destigmatize men's roles as caregivers," the actor said. "In other words in order to liberate women, we need to liberate men ... Why do we continue to undervalue fathers and overburden mothers?"

She added: "In the modern world, some families have two daddies. How does maternity leave serve them?"

Hathaway's work as an activist will begin with the U.N. itself, which does not offer equal leave for men and women. But their policies are under review, and Hathaway says she'll be active in making change at the organization before turning to companies around the world. She also announced that international company Dannon has pledged to offer 18 weeks gender-neutral, paid parental leave, which can serve as a model for other organizations.

The actor spoke to TIME about her new role as a U.N. goodwill ambassador advocating for parental leave, how starring with seven other women in Ocean's 8 was radically different from her other on-set experiences and why feminism should unite us, not divide us.

How did you become an ambassador?

The United Nations reached out to me, and I was very interested. But it took us a while to figure out what my issue was going to be. Then life provided the answer: I got pregnant. A week after I had my son — I was still fired up on adrenaline — I had an epiphany: the mommy wars are bullsh-t. They distract from the larger, institutional problem of parental leave. It was an issue that had always been abstract to me. Now it was real.

What did you learn?

America is the only high-income country that does not have paid maternity leave. We have 12 weeks unpaid, which means many people can't afford to take it. One in four American mothers has to return to work two weeks after they give birth because they are economically unable to stay at home. It just broke my heart.

The campaign is for parental leave, not just maternity leave. Why?

Studies show that when men are able to spend time with their children, everyone is happier — the parents, the child. The conversation in America has always been about maternity leave, and there's a healthier option.

And the fact that it's only offered to women means that a lot of women don't take it because they think it will derail them on their career track. And the fact is — unfairly — it often does. It's a motherhood penalty.

Do you think of this issue as political?

No matter who you voted for, this affects you. If you're a parent, it affects you. If you were once a child, and we all were, this affects you.

President Trump campaigned on a plan that would only offer leave to mothers but not fathers.

I think in the case of America because the rules are so under-written and under-realized, we have to create legislation that reflects how this issue has evolved around the world, and that means leave for all parents. If you think of benefit policies like technology, why in the year 2017 would you give your employees a computer from the '80s or '90s when we know there's something out there that works better and

makes people's lives easier?

What did you hear from parents?

I spoke to a mom who worked for a company that offered 12 weeks paid maternity leave. When it was time for her to go back, she felt very strongly that she wasn't ready. She went to her boss and asked for more time. Her boss said no. She considered whether she could afford to leave her job, but her job covered the family's health care. So she had to go back to work. She took her son to a day-care facility recommended by multiple moms she knew. She dropped her son off, and a few hours later he was dead. They think he suffocated. I don't mean to fear monger: that's not a common story. But if she felt she needed more time, she should have had more time.

Some actors have been outspoken about the lack of resources for moms in Hollywood — having to fight for day care on set, for instance. What has your experience been so far?

I only have one experience so far, and it's a movie that stars eight women, four of whom are mothers — which is definitely not the norm. On *Ocean's Eight*, kids were welcome on the set. [Before we started] I got an email from Sandra Bullock saying, "Hey, listen, we're going to make this a really welcoming place for kids. I know you're a brand-new mom, so don't be afraid to bring your son. We love kids here." Change is going to come, but it's going to take people like her with the power to make change to demand it.

Do you worry that *Ocean's Eight* will become political like *Ghostbusters* did or maybe even attract harassment?

When I'm a second or a third lead in a film — usually the first and second leads are men — my character doesn't feel political. But when I'm No. 1 on the call sheet, it suddenly becomes a "woman's story" and it's a statement. That's the moment that we're in. In this movie there are eight women starring, so it may well attract that sort of attention.

But good luck to any person who tries to take on Sandra Bullock and Cate Blanchett because you're not going to win.

Do you feel responsibility as a public figure to speak out politically?

A draft of my speech begins, "Oh, good, another celebrity telling you what to do with your life." But I think there are moments that demand a response not because you're a public figure but because you're a human being. For me the travel ban was one of those moments. I thought my son at some point is going to be curious where I was in that moment, and I didn't want to be absent.

How has your advocacy for feminist issues evolved over your career?

When I was a little girl, I thought being a feminist meant that I had to view boys as the enemy. I was a very fiery, passionate, righteous little thing, and that narrative that I was being held back spoke to me. I was going to have to work hard to fight against it, and I did. But that's not what feminism is about. One of the reasons I was so moved by Emma Watson's [United Nations HeforShe] speech is that I thought she gave a new, more peaceful, more loving, more evolved definition of feminism to all these little boys and girls around the world. She spoke about how men can be feminists, and we all need to work together and help each other.

And in the last three or four years, I have been really focused on what united us rather than what divides us. There's this misconception that women gaining more means men lose, and that's not the case. We need allies, and we need to be allies for men, too.

-reprinted from *Motto*

Region: International ^[3]

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