

Why men should start taking paternity leave ^[1]

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Source: Marketplace

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Apr 2017

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

On March 8, as the world marked International Women's Day, Karen Ellemann spent it surrounded by men. The Danish minister for equality was touring male-dominated companies in Denmark in hopes of meeting with young fathers and fathers-to-be and convincing them to take the parental leave that is allotted to them.

They told her: "I am a bit scared that I will be bored when I am on parental leave. I know that I get a connection to my child and I get a better sense of having the family up and going, but I am scared that I will be bored because who am I going to talk to?"

Ellemann hopes to dispel these types of concerns by showcasing companies that encourage their employees, especially fathers, to take leave. The practice is important to advancing women in the workplace, she said last month at a panel called "The Career Comeback."

Conversations about parental leave typically revolve around women, the gender pay gap and "the motherhood penalty" — the idea that women earn less over time because they have taken time away from work to have children. Childbirth and the weeks after it is, from a workplace standpoint, mostly a woman's issue. But if both men and women were to take parental leave and then return to work, women wouldn't be "penalized" for it, Ellemann said.

It's not just the Danes that feel that way.

Michal Flombaum, a lawyer who attended the women's strike in New York, said she thinks the "mommy track" pressure is a real obstacle for gender equality.

"Until men feel comfortable to take paternity leave, maternity leave will always be seen as something that could hold women back in their career," she said.

Currently, the U.S. does not require companies to provide their employees, female or male, with any parental leave. About 20 percent — one in five — of women who took maternity leave were paid for it, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. For men, that number was 13 percent.

About seven in 10 U.S. fathers took off 10 days or less to spend with their new child. Working mothers who take maternity leave take off an average of 10 weeks from work.

In contrast, Denmark provides new parents with a lot more time off — about 52 weeks of paid leave. Thirty-two of those weeks can be split between parents. In 2013, only 7.2 percent of Danish fathers took part of the shareable leave. In other Nordic countries, the percentage of fathers taking parental leave is higher mainly due to imposed quotas, according to a 2015 New Republic article. Under the quotas, dads who do not take their leave lose it. Their leave cannot be transferred to the mother.

In Norway, where as of 2016 fathers are eligible for 14 weeks (equivalent to little over three months), about 18 percent of dads have taken the time off. In Sweden, the leave is three months and about 24 percent dads have spent that time with their families. In Iceland, where the time off is five months, a third of dads have stayed home.

Whether fathers take their paternity leave or not can also be a sign of character, said Anne-Marie Slaughter, who moderated the panel that Ellemann appeared on. In 2012, Slaughter penned "Why women still can't have it all" for the Atlantic, highlighting how she juggled being a mom and a director of policy at the U.S. State Department. Currently Slaughter serves as president and CEO of New America, a think tank focused on workplace issues, such as parental leave.

"I had a Finnish CEO say to me that now when he interviews young fathers, if they didn't take their parental leave, he is much less likely to hire them," Slaughter said. "As I would feel, because it says something about somebody's character that they have children, as a father, and they have a chance to bond with their children and support their partner, and they don't take it."

Granted, it is easier for companies to offer parental leave when it is financed by the government through tax revenue, Ellemann said.

"It's something that I know many Americans look upon and some of them get very scared and call us socialists. Don't be scared, because it really works," she said. "It's not that I am extremely fond of paying extremely high taxes, but when I look into the possibilities and the

safeguards it provides, it's very unique."

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