

America's lack of paid parental leave policies hurt middle-class women the most ^[1]

'We are rapidly losing valuable talent'

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EXCERPTS

Care is the core of strong families, an educated and active citizenry and a vibrant economy. The ability of Americans to care for each other is at the heart of middle-class economics, even though its role is rarely recognized. Many still view the economy as driven by individual men who support their families with paid work, who are in turn supported by their wives in the home. This view — which was never accurate for large swaths of America — is at least 50 years out of date and actively undermines today's economy.

We must begin by understanding what care actually is. It is traditionally thought of as a set of physical tasks — bathing, dressing, feeding, physical and mental exercise — for the very young, the very old, the ill and the disabled. Yet those physical tasks are actually just a platform for a much more complex set of intellectual and emotional interactions that develop human potential or slow its decline. Care is best understood as any activity that involves investment in others rather than ourselves: investment of the time, energy, knowledge, motivation, discipline and support necessary to enable others to grow, succeed and maintain their capacities.

Americans in particular see our society as the sum of individuals striving for themselves. That striving creates dynamism, innovation and fulfillment. But it depends on an often invisible infrastructure of care. Invisible because for centuries care has been women's work: bringing babies into life and easing parents out of it, raising families and volunteering for communities.

Poor women have always carried the dual burden of paid and unpaid work; rich women have often paid others to provide care. But middle-class women have been caught in between, barely able to survive on one wage but still expected to put in the "second shift" of care work after their first shift of paid work is over. These same women are expected to have a baby on a Friday and return to work the following Monday, unless they can cobble together vacation, sick leave and — with a sympathetic employer — maybe a few weeks of voluntary maternity leave. Sadly, a 2015 survey showed that one in four employed American women return to work within two weeks of giving birth.

The United States is woefully behind virtually every country in the world with regard to the provision of paid maternity leave; our developed-country peers have long since surpassed us by offering paid parental leave — to fathers as well as mothers. Advocates on the front lines of our current policy debate, such as Family Values @Work, are pushing for six weeks of paid family and medical leave at both the state and federal level — similar policies have been adopted in New Jersey, New York, California, Rhode Island and a growing number of American cities.

That's a start. But what we really need is a sea-change in terms of how we think about care policy — not as a luxury or an employment benefit but rather as a necessity for economic security, competitiveness and health. Child care for two children now costs more than rent in the majority of the U.S, steadily driving women out of the workforce because they cannot afford to leave their homes. That means we are rapidly losing valuable talent that would otherwise contribute to innovation, productivity and growth.

Providing affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare, together with long-enough leave to allow mothers and fathers to bond with their children after birth, also shapes young brains in ways that determines their potential for lifelong learning, emotional stability and resilience. That means that every dollar we invest in early education is a dollar that will return lifelong benefits in terms of reduced social costs and increased human capital.

The same is true of dollars spent enabling family members to care for each other when they are sick and aging. As we learn more and more about the social determinants of health — from nutrition to community violence and stress to housing and parks — we will come to understand how valuing care improves society as well as individual outcomes. And as baby boomers age, more and more of us will push for policies that make it possible for elderly Americans to age in place in multi-generational communities that combine unpaid and paid care.

It is time to think big. The women's rights movement of the late 20th century brought to the forefront issues like the prevention of violence against women and overt workplace and social discrimination. Legislation passed by President Clinton in the 1990s made family and medical leave a right for millions of workers, although effectively only for those able to forgo income from work. Over 80 years ago, Social Security revolutionized economic security for American families, and we need something of the same magnitude today. Something

bold and broad, like the Universal Family Care plan, which would provide flexible assistance for child care, long-term care and paid family and medical leave for all who need it.

Families have changed in many ways, but at their core, they are a group of people who love each other and commit to mutual support and care over a lifetime. They are the backbone of our communities and our society, the incubators of our dreams and of the resilience necessary when those dreams fail.

If families thrive, America will thrive. We simply need to understand that care is at the core — for all of us — and adopt the policies to make it possible for us to care for one another and ourselves.

Anne-Marie Slaughter is New America's president and CEO, and the first woman to lead the U.S. State Department's Office of Policy Planning under President Obama.

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