

UNICEF study confirms: The U.S. ranks last for family-friendly policies ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

We hear plenty about how the United States is one of the richest, most developed countries in the world.

But when it comes to being family-friendly, the U.S. is one of the worst.

A new study from UNICEF dives into four different categories measuring a country's "family friendliness." These included paid leave available to mothers, paid leave reserved for fathers, childcare enrollment for kids under 3 years old, and childcare enrollment between age 3 and school age. UNICEF measured 41 high- and middle-income countries on these indicators.

And the results in America were not pretty.

Going up against the 40 other developed countries, the U.S. came in dead last in terms of paid leave available to mothers and fathers. It was also the only OECD country that offered a whopping zero federally-mandated weeks of maternity leave (OECD means part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).

The study noted that some states in the U.S. offer paid parental leave insurance programs to eligible workers — but we know those programs are few and far between, difficult to be "eligible" for, and only available in a small minority of states. The result: only 14% of civilian workers have access to any amount of paid parental leave.

Naturally, considering the lack of guaranteed maternity leave, the U.S. also fails to offer federally-mandated paid leave for new fathers. In contrast, 32 other countries from UNICEF's study of high- and mid-income countries offer at least some paid paternity leave (Japan topping the list with a staggering 30.4 weeks of paid paternity leave).

The U.S. was saved from a definitive last-place finish solely because UNICEF did not have access to U.S. data for the other two categories: childcare enrollment.

But in terms of paid leave available, compared to other countries as rich as the U.S., the outlook is bleak.

Other countries offer as many as 85 weeks (Estonia) of paid maternity leave. Even countries in the middle of the pack from UNICEF's study offered significant paid leave time: Republic of Korea (25 weeks), Spain and the Netherlands (16 weeks), and Belgium (13 weeks), for example.

The minimum paid leave available should be 6 months, according to a report published by The New America Foundation. Postpartum mothers are met with numerous challenges in the weeks and months after childcare, including but not limited to: depression, fatigue, general pain and illness, and lactation issues including mastitis, not to mention figuring out how to take care of their newborn.

For men, they deserve the opportunity to be with their families, to care for and bond with their newborn. According to PL+US, 82% of fathers want to equally share the responsibility of parenting, yet even when companies do offer parental leave to fathers, they often feel they are not supported and unable to take more than a couple of weeks off. Recently, Dove's Men+Care created a fund to support men taking their full leave and found that the benefits of parental leave for men range from increased confidence in parenting to better health outcomes for moms and improved relationships.

Beyond the personal and family benefits of men taking parental leave, if we ever want to see equality in the workplace, partners of birthing mothers must engage at home and take the parental leave offered to them. Providing benefits only to the birthing mother, or significantly longer benefits over a "secondary parent, similar to JP Morgan Chase's policy," continues to perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforces the parenting penalty, which starts right from birth when these traditional stereotypes take hold and pushes one parent into the primary caretaking role.

But even if 6 months' leave isn't in the cards for the immediate future, the U.S. needs to continue to take steps forward. The House Ways and Means Committee held a full committee meeting in early May to address paid family and medical leave policies. Both Republicans and

Democrats showed up and asked questions, which by itself is simply exciting, according to Elisabeth Jacobs, senior director for family economic security at the Washington Center for Equitable Growth. Jacobs shared that just four years ago, a similar hearing was not well-attended and did not have a bi-partisan interest. Yet the argument remains around the logistics and details: What kind of structure would paid-leave take? Who would be eligible? Should states be responsible for policy, or the federal government? How do we fund it?

For a country constantly preaching the importance of family, it's time to start walking the talk.

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Region: United States ^[3]

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