

Two new moms return to work - one in Seattle, one in Stockholm

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EXCERPTS

My two best friends are both named Sarah. They are smart, ambitious women. Both are white, college educated, and upper-middle class. They work in challenging, rewarding professional jobs and are married to wonderful men. And they're both mothers to beautiful little boys. Despite all these similarities, their experiences as new mothers returning to work after giving birth couldn't have been more different.

Why? Human and social capital don't explain it. Neither do family structure or marital status. Their contrasting experiences boil down to one factor: geography. One Sarah lives in Stockholm, Sweden. The other lives in Seattle, Washington.

Sarah in Stockholm

Sarah grew up in northern California, attended college in the Pacific northwest, and then lived and worked internationally. In her late 20s, she moved to Stockholm to pursue a master's degree, which cost her nothing because she was a European Union citizen (via her parents). She now works in the environmental sector, and she and her husband have two sons, ages one-and-a-half and three.

When Sarah first learned she was pregnant, she was excited, but also a bit anxious: how would her boss respond? Being American, she thought he might be frustrated or disappointed by the news. But when she told him, about 15 weeks into her pregnancy, he responded with enthusiasm.

Sarah planned to take at least a year off work after her baby was born. Swedish parents are entitled to 480 days of government-paid leave (at 80% of earnings up to a ceiling of SEK 37,000 or US\$3,700 a month) for each baby born or adopted. This is funded through the federal tax system and administered by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan), not individual employers, which is one reason why bosses like Sarah's have little reason to be frustrated when employees have kids: it doesn't hurt their bottom line.

Single parents get all 480 days. Those who have a co-parent — whether they're gay or heterosexual, cohabiting, married, or separated — get 90 days each, then can split the rest as they see fit and take it in increments of their choosing any time before the child is eight (as long as they give their employer two months' notice). Because Sarah's husband is from elsewhere in Europe and was working outside Sweden, he was ineligible, so she got the full 480-day benefit.

She opted to begin leave seven weeks before her due date, and in July 2015, gave birth in a public hospital in Stockholm. She had an emergency Cesarean-section and stayed for three nights — all free of cost since healthcare in Sweden is state-funded and universal. During her leave, she received approximately US\$1,500 a month after taxes, which was less than she earned when at work but helped to cover basic costs. As a middle-class family, she and her husband could accommodate the temporary dip in inflows without acute hardship.

Of course, like any new parent, Sarah struggled in other ways. She remembers months of sleepless nights and exhausting days acclimating to life with a newborn, learning how to deal with chronic infant ear infections, toddler tantrums on icy playgrounds, and weeks of solo parenting while her husband traveled for work. But never did she worry about whether she would be fired while on leave or how she would be received upon returning to work. She stayed home with her son until he was 15 months old and returned to her job feeling ready to embrace professional life again. She had already weaned him from breastfeeding, so never had to consider the logistics of pumping breast milk in the office, nor did she fret about finding a good daycare or nanny, since Sweden has an excellent public childcare system that guarantees every child a spot starting at age one. (It is also extremely affordable: free for low-income families and capped at SEK1,287 (US\$160) a month for even the wealthiest families.) Sarah simply put her name on several lists while on leave and her son got a place in her first-choice preschool, the one closest to home, within two months.

As part of her leave, she was able to attend the standard first week of inskolning — when parents go to school with their toddlers to help them adjust to the new environment. On her first day back at work, colleagues welcomed her warmly. In Sweden, "when you have a baby you're seen in a positive light, even if it means leaving your workplace for a year or more," she told me. "I was treated as a more accomplished version of myself, since many of my colleagues had kids and were supportive of my new role as a mother. I never once felt negatively judged by my manager or colleagues. Over a year of parental leave is the standard for nearly all parents here, both men and

women.”

After only a couple months back at work, Sarah learned she was pregnant with her second child. Again, she told her boss when she was 15 weeks along, and, again, he expressed only support. She gave birth to her second son in May 2018 and took another parental leave. Eleven months in, she was headhunted by another firm. She interviewed, got an offer, and accepted the job with a start date of roughly three months later. After 18 months’ paid leave with her second son, she enrolled him in the same preschool as his brother and went to work at her new company — but at an 80% schedule, or 32 hours per week. Working parents in Sweden are entitled to cut their working hours to 75%, or 30 hours a week, until their children are eight, and, as a mother of two, Sarah wanted to find the right balance between earning an income and spending time with her boys. She plans on working a reduced schedule for at least a year and then will decide if she wants to go up to a 100%, or 40 hours a week.

To be sure, life as a working mom with two kids under the age of three is no walk in the park. Sarah called me during her third week in her new job. She was rushing from her office to the metro station because her three-year-old had a fever and needed to be picked up from preschool, and her husband was out of town. I could tell that she was tired. She said she dreaded the long evening ahead with a sick toddler and a one-year-old who might catch the bug, too. But, again, she didn’t worry about the implications of her hasty departure from work or any impending sick days. She knew she had the legal right to stay home to care for her sons and to be compensated for it. And it never crossed her mind that by exercising it she would cause a boss or a colleague to question her commitment to her job.

Sarah in Seattle

Sarah grew up in the Pacific northwest and attended college in California. After graduation, she accepted a position in corporate sales, which took her to several cities across the United States during her 20s before she met and married her husband and decided to settle in her hometown of Seattle, Washington.

At age 31, she took a new job as an account manager at a small company. She vaguely remembers reading about its parental leave policy during contract negotiations and being pleased that employees received some time off after childbirth, even if it was unpaid. Since the United States has no national paid parental leave policy and only 15% of Americans have access to paid leave through their employers, she didn’t expect anything better. She was confident that when she and her husband decided to have a child, they’d sort it out together.

In the fall of 2018, Sarah and her husband learned she was pregnant and were thrilled. She called me with the news shortly after her first trimester, and we talked excitedly about their plans and how she was feeling. A few weeks later, she called again: She was studying the fine print of her company’s leave policy, and knowing I study work-family policy, wanted to talk through the details with me. Confused, Sarah began to read the document aloud. She faltered, paused, reread — and then started to cry.

Her firm had no legal obligation to give her or any of its employees any parental leave after childbirth. The 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act does require companies to allow workers up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for a personal illness, including pregnancy complications, or to care for an immediate family member, such as a newborn. But — importantly — this doesn’t apply universally. FMLA states: “Employees are eligible for leave if they have worked for their employer at least 12 months, at least 1,250 hours over the past 12 months, and work at a location where the company employs 50 or more employees.” And there’s another caveat: workers are guaranteed a job when they return, but not necessarily their job.

Although Sarah’s company employed far fewer than 50 people, it did still allow employees to take up to 12 weeks’ unpaid, job-protected leave, as she remembered, and the verbiage in the HR handbook implied that this was quite generous. However, employees were prohibited from using any paid vacation or sick days in the two months leading up to childbirth or for two months after leave. Over the phone, I heard Sarah’s voice turn from anguish to anger. She received 18 days of PTO (Paid Time Off) annually (more than most Americans get) but couldn’t use any of it to, say, take a day off in the last trimester of her pregnancy or in the first month of her baby’s life.

Her best option was to use short-term disability benefits (part of her health insurance package) for six weeks after giving birth, during which time she would get 60% of her pay. After that, she could take the remainder of her 18 PTO days, and for the final stretch of her 12-week maternity leave, she would go unpaid.

Ironing out these details was a huge relief for Sarah. But around the same time, just after she announced her pregnancy, her friends who already had kids told her to start a childcare search immediately. Daycare slots were few and far between, especially in a facility that was reasonably safe and somewhat affordable. So, she and her husband spent evenings and weekends in her second and third trimester visiting daycares and submitting their names to waitlist after waitlist.

Sarah worked full-time until the day before she gave birth, at 39 weeks and three days into her pregnancy. She worked a half-day on the morning she went into labor and gave birth the following night. After a difficult delivery, she stayed in the hospital for two days while their son was admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for a short stint. She and her husband took their baby home, exhausted and overjoyed, when he was three days old.

Soon after, a hospital employee called to offer them a payment plan for the remainder of their bill. Insurance had covered a portion, but the remainder — about US\$9,000 — fell to them. The billing agent reassured Sarah it was more than normal for families to pay for their child’s birth in installments.

Sarah and her husband began to find a rhythm around the house in their first week as a family of three, but, because he was an independent contractor, it was difficult for him to take much time off. Each day not working was lost earning potential, which, given Sarah’s reduced leave income and the hospital bill, they couldn’t afford. He ended up taking only nine days including the day of their son’s birth and two subsequent days in the NICU.

Sarah's three months of leave flew by. And at the end of it, they faced a crisis: her son still hadn't gotten into a daycare. She couldn't extend her time off. If she quit to stay home less than 30 days after returning to work, there was a chance her employer would claw back its contribution to her family's insurance coverage. She and her husband devised a workaround that made my head hurt. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they would both work from home so they could tag team feeding, changing, and attending to their son while alternating their work tasks and conference calls. Parents and friends would stop by to help on occasion. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, they would both go into their office, and for the first two weeks, Sarah's mom, who lived nearby, would watch the baby. The following week, her mother-in-law would fly in to babysit those days. This was as far as their plan went, and it only covered their son until he was four months old.

Returning to work meant Sarah had to adjust quickly to life in her fast-paced office while trying to meet the physical demands of new motherhood in private. Her boss offered her an office with a locking door so she could pump breastmilk. Section 7 of the Fair Labor Standards Act requires employers to give workers reasonable break time and "a place, other than a bathroom, that is shielded from view and free from intrusion from coworkers and the public, which may be used by an employee to express breast milk," but Sarah had heard horror stories of women pumping in restrooms and storage closets at work, so she was thankful for this accommodation. Before, she'd worked in a cubicle.

And yet, Sarah struggled during her first week back. The pace at work had only sped up. Colleagues said that her return was "great timing." Due to a reorganization during her absence, she had new responsibilities — on top of her previous workload. Sarah texted me: "I'm sitting in my locked office texting you, crying, and starting a pumping session."

We talked later. Sarah said, "Part of me is like, well, they didn't make me go have a baby. It's not their fault I'm tired." But she was also frustrated. She'd left work an hour or so early out of sheer exhaustion and sensed colleagues' annoyance that she wasn't being a "team player" by staying the full day. She didn't know whether she could keep it up, or if she wanted to.

By some miracle, a spot in her first-choice daycare opened up before the family help expired. It cost US\$1,550 a month (US\$18,600 annually), but she told me that was affordable compared to other nearby centers and it was close to work. Again, she felt lucky to have this option, since the United States has no national, government-supported childcare system for kids of any age and there are vast disparities in the cost and quality of private care.

Still, the last time we spoke, Sarah was unsure what the coming months would bring for her and her family. She and her husband wanted to have another child but worried about the additional stress and costs. Though she was trying to put her best foot forward with colleagues and clients each day, she felt like she was falling below her boss and peers' unchanged expectations. She wondered whether things might be better at another company, or if she should just quit work to stay home until her child (or hopefully children) began elementary school. But Sarah liked her job. She didn't want to change positions or leave. But a workable solution eluded her.

Making Motherhood Work

Nowhere on the planet is motherhood easy. Both Sarahs — and any parent — will attest to that fact. But it's undeniably far easier to work for pay and raise kids in Sweden than in the United States. I witnessed this firsthand in watching my two capable, hardworking friends transition to working mom life with wildly different experiences.

It was a bit of a fallacy to blame this disparity on geography. The real reason is social policy.

To be sure, robust support for working parents isn't cheap and Swedes pay a lot in taxes. In 2015, its top marginal effective income tax rate was 56.9%, which applied to all income over 1.5 times the national average, whereas the top marginal tax rate in the United States in 2015 was 46.3%. And it applied to only those with salaries 8.5 times the national average, or around \$400,000. But Swedes also get a lot for their money and still manage to have a very successful economy, ranking 8th in per capita GDP adjusted for purchasing power parity among 30 wealthy OECD countries in 2017, according to the International Monetary Fund.

One obvious alternative to increasing taxes in the United States is to reallocate existing funds. Take defense spending. In 2015 the United States spent 3.2% of GDP (\$649 billion) on its military and only 1.1% of GDP (roughly \$200 billion) on family benefits in tax measures, services, and cash benefits (latest figures available). In other words, the government spends about three times more on its military annually than it does on public supports to families. To put this in context, OECD countries spend on average 2.4% of GDP on family benefits. Sweden, alongside the United Kingdom, Hungary, and Denmark, spend between 3.4% and 3.6%.

The United States has the most family-hostile public policy of any OECD country and is one of two countries on the planet with no paid family leave. The federal government guarantees no vacation or sick days. It has no national childcare system, healthcare system, or social insurance entitlement. There is no federal body dedicated to family issues. It is one of a handful of countries with no mention of the word "family" in the Constitution. Workers receive support around childbirth and adoption at employers' discretion, which means that companies like Sarah-in-Seattle's can opt out of paid parental leave and schedule flexibility. U.S. citizens might pay lower taxes but, to enjoy the same level of benefits as Swedes, they pay much more out of pocket, in the form of fees, surcharges, insurance premiums, co-payments, costly school tuition, childcare, elder-care, and more. They're not getting nearly as much for their money.

Aside from the obvious harms to parents (and their children) due to financial stress and emotional exhaustion, the drain on productivity, talent (when parents opt out of work), and profitability for organizations is plain. Both Sarah-in-Stockholm and Sarah-in-Seattle tried to bring their best selves to work each day for their employers. One found this task much easier said than done.

In the absence of legislative change, some U.S. businesses have stepped up to offer work-family policies to their employees. That's great news — that is, if you have a secure, salaried role in one of these firms. In reality, the workers most in need of support are those least likely

to have access to it in our privatized system. The onus shouldn't be on individual employers — except to put pressure on government officials to develop a more holistic solution to the problem. We need a national system to support all working families. Creating one won't be simple, but every other wealthy industrialized nation has found a way to provide paid parental leave and subsidized healthcare and childcare to all their residents. Surely Americans can solve this puzzle, too.

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