

A day after giving birth, I was asked back to work. America needs paid family leave ^[1]

The US has one of the highest maternal mortality rates among developed countries. Yet Senator Joe Manchin struggles to understand why paid family leave is important

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 27 Dec 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Twenty-four hours after I gave birth to my second child, my employer called to ask when I planned to return to work.

It had been a high-risk pregnancy and a complicated, precarious delivery involving a breech birth. I should have remained in the hospital for several days. But my oldest child – then just a year old – needed major surgery that couldn't be delayed. So we brought our newborn home and rushed to prepare to leave for a hospital two hours away where our oldest child would have surgery while our newborn was at home being cared for by relatives.

As we gathered our things, the phone rang. It was someone from the HR office at the paper bag factory where I worked. After briefly making the obligatory inquiry as to how my new baby was doing, the HR rep got to the real reason for her call.

“So, we know you were planning to take a few weeks off, but I just wanted to make sure you knew that you can come back anytime now. I could even get you back on the schedule this weekend, if you wanted.” After a brief pause, she added, “I figured, you know, you might want to start getting paid again.”

I got the message loud and clear.

My employer provided no paid maternity leave, so the longer I was off from work, the longer I would go without income. With two young children to support and medical bills piling up, this was money I desperately needed. By dangling a paycheck in front of me, the HR rep knew she was making it very tempting for me to return to work sooner than I had planned – and way sooner than I should.

That was in the early 1990s, in a rural area in the coal region of Pennsylvania, where I live. I doubt much has changed since then.

The version of the Build Back Better plan passed by the House on 19 November includes a provision for paid family leave. While it would mandate only four weeks of paid time off – much less than the 12 weeks in the original plan – it is being heralded as a big victory, which is depressing. Even worse: there's a good chance that even that minimal amount of paid family leave won't survive in the final version of the bill.

At least, not if Joe Manchin has his way. The West Virginia senator has voiced his opposition to any paid family leave in the bill, and the Democrats need his critical vote to pass the package in the Senate.

It's incomprehensible that one individual could single-handedly decide the fate of something that affects so many American families. Manchin has never had to endure the physical and mental agony of returning to work before you've recovered from childbirth. His family is wealthy and has likely benefited from the support of nannies, assistants and paid daycare. I'm guessing he has never known the panic of worrying you might lose your job – or not have enough in your paycheck to pay essential bills – because you need to miss work to care for a sick child or handle a family emergency.

It's stunning that one man who has never needed paid leave has the ability to keep it from millions of parents who do. Manchin seems to be enjoying the power trip, relishing the attention his cat-and-mouse game has attracted. But for many people – particularly postpartum mothers – this is no game. The ability to take even just a few precious weeks at home without fear of financial losses could literally be a matter of life and death.

Like many industrial employers (at least at that time), the factory where I worked used a point system to track and regulate employee absences. When you took a day off – unpaid, of course – it didn't matter if you were sick, taking a vacation, or attending to a sick relative or family emergency. It was all treated the same way. You were given a point for each absence. After five points, you were given a warning. At six points, a one-day suspension without pay. If you reached seven points, you were fired. I received a point after absences for each of my appointments for prenatal care, and another for the time I missed while having the baby.

It's inexcusable that American companies are allowed to operate like this. Among the handful of countries without any form of national paid leave, the United States is by far the largest and richest.

Forcing people to choose between their paycheck and their families or their own physical health is heartless. In the case of someone who has just given birth, it is particularly cruel – and dangerous. I suffered serious (and potentially life-threatening) complications during and after each of my pregnancies. I am far from unusual. The US has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world among developed countries – and the risk is especially high for black and Native American women and women in poor rural areas. Workers in these communities are also more likely to receive little or no paid leave from their employers.

Only roughly one in five workers in the US has access to paid family leave. The rest are forced to make impossible and risky choices. One in four new mothers returns to work within two weeks of giving birth. I know firsthand that is not nearly long enough to recover.

Even looking at it purely from an economic and labor standpoint, a national paid leave policy makes sense. Paid leave actually keeps people in their jobs in the long run. When parents don't have even the bare minimum of paid leave available for emergencies, they may be forced to quit their job – or end up getting fired.

While paid family leave could make a big difference to new parents, they aren't the only ones who benefit. Paid leave can also be extremely beneficial to people in the “sandwich generation” situation – which is exactly where I am now. About 44 million Americans provide care to parents or other adult relatives or friends, representing 37bn hours of unpaid labor each year.

Providing a basic minimum of paid family leave to all Americans shouldn't be controversial – and definitely shouldn't seem like such an impossible goal.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: parental leave ^[4]

mothers' labour force participation ^[5]

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