

She compared motherhood in four countries. The US isn't looking good ^[1]

A new book examines childcare policies across the globe – and asks whether parenthood in the US needs to be so hard

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

When Abigail Leonard saw the news that the Trump administration was considering handing out \$5,000 “baby bonuses” to new mothers, she realized that she had already received one.

A longtime international reporter, Leonard gave birth to three children while living in Japan, which offers a year of parental leave, publicly run daycare, and lump-sum grants to new parents that amount to thousands of US dollars. But it was not until moving back to the US in 2023 that Leonard grasped just how robust Japan’s social safety net for families is – and, in comparison, just how paltry the US net feels.

Not only is the US the only rich country on the planet without any form of national paid leave, but an uncomplicated birth covered by private insurance tends to cost families about \$3,000, which, Leonard discovered, is far more than in most other nations. The federal government also spends a fraction of what most other wealthy countries spend on early education and childcare, as federally subsidized childcare is primarily available only to the lowest earners. Middle-class families are iced out.

Leonard traces the effects of policies and disparities like these in her new book, *Four Mothers*, which follows the pregnancy and early childrearing experiences of four urban, middle-class women living in Japan, Kenya, Finland and the US. Published earlier this month, *Four Mothers* provides a deeply personal window into how policy shapes parents’ lives. And it has emerged as an increasingly rightwing US seems poised to embrace the ideology of pronatalism and policies aimed at convincing people to have more kids.

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Today, Leonard writes, corporations have an entrenched interest in keeping childcare from becoming a public good in the US. Private equity is heavily invested in childcare companies. Wealthy corporations, especially big tech companies, can also use their generous paid leave policies to lure in the best talent.

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The US has become far more accepting of women’s careerist ambitions over the last 50 years – especially as it has become more difficult for US families to sustain themselves on a single income – but balancing work and family life is still often treated as a matter of personal responsibility (or, frequently, as a personal failing).

To improve mothers’ lives, Leonard found, a commitment to flexible gender norms – in the home and at work – must be coupled with a robust social safety net.

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Related link: Republicans are raiding childcare funding – to push women out of the workforce ^[3]

Region: United States ^[4]

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