# U.S. steers its own course on family leave [US] [1]

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EXCERPTS

In Santa Fe, N.M., Linda Strauss McIlroy, a first-time mother, is trying to get used to the thought of soon putting her 2-month-old boy in day care so she can get back to work.

"It's hard for me to imagine leaving him," she says. "Just not being with him all day, leaving him with a virtual stranger. And then that's it till, you know, I retire. It's kind of crazy to think about it."

Across the border in Vancouver, British Columbia, Suzanne Dobson is back at work after 14 months of paid maternity leave.

Across the ocean, in Sweden, Magnus Larsson is looking forward to splitting 16 months of parental leave at 80 percent pay with his girlfriend. They are expecting their first baby in a week.

With little public debate, the United States has chosen a radically different approach to maternity leave than the rest of the developed world. The United States and Australia are the only industrialized countries that don't provide paid leave for new mothers nationally.

Australian mothers have it better, however, with one year of job-protected leave. The U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act provides for 12 weeks of job-protected leave, but it only covers those who work for larger companies.

How did it end up this way?

"To me it's a puzzle. I can give you all the arguments that have been used, but that still doesn't really solve the puzzle," says Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, a professor of child development and education at Columbia University.

According to Brooks-Gunn, some countries, like France, expanded maternity leave after World War II to fight falling birthrates and encourage childbearing.

Jane Waldfogel, also a professor at Columbia, says another part of the puzzle is that the European and American feminist movements had differing goals.

In Europe, feminists emphasized special treatment for mothers, including maternity leave and child care.

"The American feminist movement didn't want to hear anything about mothers," Waldfogel says. "They wanted equal rights for women and didn't emphasize special treatment."

The U.S. feminist movement has moved away from this viewpoint, but that hasn't led to a change in maternity rules.

To Strauss McIlroy in Santa Fe, those three months certainly feel inadequate.

"I thought that I might be one of those who'd be kind of looking forward to going back, that I'd be all babied out," she says. "But I'm really very apprehensive about it."

There have been several attempts at introducing paid maternity leave in the United States. The Clinton administration wanted to allow states to use unemployment funds for maternity leaves, but that was shot down by the Bush administration after opposition from business groups concerned with increased contribution to state unemployment funds.

"There are a couple of central problems when we look at paid leave legislation. The first is: who's paying for it?" asks Michael Eastman, director of labor policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Waldfogel agrees that it's too much to ask employers to shoulder the cost of introducing paid maternity leave.

"As long as what we have in mind ... is asking employers to both hold the job open and pay the salary, we're going to get tremendous resistance from employers," she says.

Five states &emdash; California, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island -- require employers to have temporary disability programs, which pay benefits if the pregnancy is defined as a disability by a doctor. A few others have infant care programs that pay

subsidies to low-income families for up to two years.

In New York City, Kelsey Goss, a public-school teacher, is trying to build her tutoring business so she and her husband can stay afloat financially when she goes on unpaid maternity leave in October.

"When I tell people that as a teacher I get zero paid maternity leave, they're stunned," she says. "In a job like that, that's about taking care of kids, those are the benefits?"

How does she think her benefits compare with Europe?

"I don't even want to know," she says.

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