

Rocking cradle to career with paid family leave^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Over the weekend, at the wedding of a mutual friend, I reconnected with a Berkeley-based nurse practitioner, whose line of work is obstetrics and gynecology. After the usual pleasantries, we got down to the business of early care and education. She, channeling all the conflicts, ambivalence, and frustrations of young mothers trying to balance it all; I, lamenting the lack of support in the U.S. for families with young children. The conversation flowed easily, as only it could for two veterans of the "mommy wars," second-wave feminism, and parenting life in late 20th and early 21st century America.

Suddenly, the health care provider lobbed a hard ball at the policy analyst: "What's your vision?" she asked. "That's a good question," I said, as I watched the groom's grandchildren pirouette on the dance floor. "Well, to start," I said, "paid family leave," reminding her that the United States is the only developed country on the face of the earth without it.

Not that we haven't tried. But our efforts have been meager. In 1993, the U.S. Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which guarantees up to 12 weeks of leave to recent parents in businesses with at least 50 employees. This guarantee extends only to those who have worked for at least a year and have met a threshold of 1,250 hours in the previous 12 months. The bottom line: 40 percent of U.S. workers are not eligible for FMLA benefits. And the other 60 percent toil in a workplace where only a quarter of employers offer fully paid maternity leave. The reality is bleakest for middle- and low-income families. Two in five working parents with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty level have no paid sick or personal days, not to mention vacation. Given their circumstances, unpaid family leave to care for a child is a non-starter.

Here in the land of self-sufficiency and family values, foremost of which is the sanctity of parental childrearing, anything that smacks of social welfare statehood is a tough sell. Never mind that nearly 57 percent of women with children under age one are in the workforce. We remain a country in denial.

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I'm green with envy when I look at other nations' policies. Most developed countries offer between three months and a year of paid family leave -- to mothers, and in some cases, to fathers. Our northern neighbor, for example, offers 34 weeks of paid parental leave (in addition to 15 weeks of maternity leave, and, in the province of Quebec, three to five weeks of paternity leave). Sweden and Germany, with their 47-week packages, top the list of countries providing paid family leave, followed by Norway, Finland, Canada, and Spain, all of which offer leaves of at least six months.

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The skills that children need to be ready for and succeed in school, and in life, blossom in their earliest relationships with their parents. We cannot recoup that time. The losses -- reflected in grade retention, high-school dropout rates, low college completion, incarceration, high poverty rates, diminished competitiveness in the global economy -- reverberate through the life span, and society at large. When are we going to wake up, and rock the cradle?

- reprinted from the Huffington Post

Region: United States^[2]

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