

Sweden gives new dads something that Americans can only dream of ^[1]

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Source: *mic.com* ^[2]

Format: Article

Publication Date: 24 Jul 2014

EXCERPTS

If you want proof that patriarchy damages men as well as women, look no further than the way we view paternity leave.

The division of responsibility in caring for newborns is crucial in determining the balance of child care for years to come. And American laws dictate it should be the woman who stops working once a baby is born.

Around the world, 177 countries offer paid maternity leave versus the 81 that provide paid leave for new fathers. Surprise, surprise: The U.S. is not one of those 81 countries.

In a conventional couple, this places the burden of care solely on the woman. The early weeks and months after bringing a baby home from the hospital can be overwhelming and exhausting and incredibly special. But the domain of women only? Not so much.

Legislation that falls along gender lines like this in the U.S. stipulates that a person's gender should determine their rights and freedoms.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Lawmakers in Sweden understood the importance of equal options for new parents early on. For 40 years the country has offered gender-neutral paid parental leave, where a couple may decide who takes the allotted 10 days. The country now has incentives to encourage men to take that leave, and across the board, close to 90% of Swedish fathers opt to spend quality time with their newborns.

Sweden has led other industrialized countries in realizing that not offering new fathers equivalent leave is good-old fashioned institutionalized sexism. In 1995, the country's politicians introduced a "daddy month" in which families whose parent took at least one month of leave received an additional month to add to their total allowance. The Swedish government extended leave from one month to two in 2002, and some politicians want it to go further.

This scheme of incentives is evident in other European industrialized nations as politicians recognize that these entrenched gender normative expectations for behavior take a while to shake off. But that is where politicians should step in to incentivize equality. In a similar way, France passed legislation in 2000 stating all political parties should include an equal number of men and women on party lists. Since then, the number of women in political parties has been rising.

Since Swedish men started to play a greater role in child rearing, women have seen both their incomes and happiness levels increase.

There are numerous reasons why having the option of either new parent being at home full time is beneficial. Maybe the man (shocker!) also wants to spend time with his newborn child (doing so will likely give them a closer relationship in the future). Maybe the woman has a job she needs to get back to - women make up nearly 50% of the U.S. workforce, and for 40% of families, women are the primary breadwinners. Maybe there are complications and both parents are needed at home.

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