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Why Now Is the Right Time to Discuss Paid Maternity Leave



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Paid Maternity Leave

Photographed by Steven Klein, *Vogue*, June 2012

Reproductive rights, covered contraception, and the pay gap have made headlines during election season in recent years. But there is a closely related issue that doesn't get nearly as much attention, by press or by our candidates, and that is paid maternity leave.

First, the facts. The United States is the only industrialized country that doesn't require paid time off for new mothers. In fact, the only other countries in the world that share the distinction are Suriname and Papua New Guinea. What the United States does offer, under the Family and Medical Leave Act, is a guarantee that a woman's job will be waiting for her after twelve weeks off—but none of that time is paid under federal law. An abundance of women cannot afford to go so long without a paycheck, so basically the benefit adds up to: you don't get fired.

Worse, the FMLA offers the benefit of unpaid leave only to women who have worked at least 1,250 hours during the previous year for a company that employs at least 50 people. This effectively means that at least 40 percent of American workers are excluded from that small privilege, according to the Council of Economic Advisors. Of course, some American companies offer paid leave, but the salaried time off is usually significantly less than the fourteen weeks recommended by the International Labour Organization.

Translation: Under our country's laws, from the moment a woman's water breaks, she has begun to forfeit her salary.

How can it be that the United States comes close to dead last on a critical social issue that



affects almost half of its population? New York Senator **Kirsten Gillibrand** put it in stark terms at a recent political event (<https://web.archive.org/web/20141018215300/http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/19/us/politics/hillary-clinton-pivots-to-domestic-issues-as-women-voters-loom-large.html>): “Pakistan and Afghanistan that don’t even educate their girls have more paid leave. That is outrageous.”

(Pakistan offers twelve weeks, according to the ILO; Afghanistan thirteen.) A majority of European countries, including France, Austria, and Spain, offer at least fourteen paid weeks. Not surprisingly, Scandinavian nations are by far the most generous, with Norway giving new mothers 26 to 51 paid weeks off, according to World Policy Forum data, and Denmark an impressive 52 weeks or more.

Half of the American workforce is made up of women, and mothers are fast becoming the breadwinners for many families. How can a woman be expected to take the time she needs to care for a newborn, while at the same time sacrifice wages which help to keep that newborn fed and clothed? It makes no sense.

The benefits of paid parental leave are clear. Research has shown that it correlates with lower infant mortality rates, and that it actually increases the chances of a woman returning to the workplace and staying on board with higher productivity rates. Most importantly, a paid leave policy shows no significant negative effects for employers; rather, research shows that it saves them the time and costs associated with recruiting and hiring new employees to replace the new mothers who have left.

Silicon Valley, at least, has started to pick up on the advantages of paid leave. A couple years ago, Google began offering (https://web.archive.org/web/20141018215300/http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/23/technology/in-googles-inner-circle-a-falling-number-of-women.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=all&adxnnlx=1412791564-qC6glnNWWhDOVMX3LauesCw) its female employees up to five months paid maternity leave, in an effort to keep women from resigning after starting a family. Many other tech giants offer paid maternity leave. (As of this week, Apple and Facebook have even offered to cover egg freezing procedures.)

There’s reason to hope that there might be movement on the legislative level. So far, three states have implemented paid maternity leave laws. California provides new mothers with up to six weeks of pay at approximately 55 percent of their usual salary. The state of New Jersey, through its Family Leave Insurance program, offers the same amount of time, paying out two-thirds of a woman’s wages. Rhode Island pays four weeks at 60 percent of a woman’s salary.



And this year, the Department of Labor started the [#LeadonLeave](https://web.archive.org/web/20141018215300/http://www.dol.gov/featured/paidleave/) campaign (<https://web.archive.org/web/20141018215300/http://www.dol.gov/featured/paidleave/>), which aims to promote paid leave policies throughout the country. More recently, in September, the DOL awarded \$500,000 worth of grants (<https://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/u-s-awards-grants-to-explore-and-evaluate-paid-leave-in-3-states-and-d-c/>) to Massachusetts, Montana, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia to explore the possibility of introducing paid leave programs on a state level.

That's a start, but we still have a long way to go.