

WILL THE U.S. FINALLY MAKE PAID PARENTAL LEAVE A PRIORITY?

WE ARE BEHIND 184 COUNTRIES ON PAID LEAVE, BUT A NEW DEPARTMENT OF LABOR INITIATIVE IS ATTEMPTING TO CHANGE THINGS FOR WORKING PARENTS.

BY GWEN MORAN

Adrienne Masler was a happily coupled new college graduate in 2011, working as a lifeguard and waitress in Ithaca, N.Y., while she and her partner, Zachary Moltion, searched for more long-term gigs. Then, she got pregnant.

Masler landed a job as an administrative assistant at Cornell University and Moltion signed up at a temp agency, giving them a bit more stability. However, when she gave birth in December 2011, she was only entitled to six weeks of disability leave at roughly half her typical pay, because she had worked at the university for less than a year.

During that time, her infant son had two medical procedures. During her leave and after she returned to work, Masler suffered from mastitis, a painful breast tissue infection which made breastfeeding excruciating. Moltion left temp work to care for their son, and would sometimes need to bring the baby to the office for feedings because Masler was unable to pump enough breast milk at home.

"If I didn't have to go back to work in six weeks, it would have taken away the stress of feeling like I had such a time crunch to get everything resolved," she says.

PAID LEAVE BY THE NUMBERS

While stories like the CEO who left his \$100-million-a-year gig to spend more time with his daughter grab headlines, more people in the U.S. have experiences like Masler's, dealing with low or no pay and very brief windows of approved leave time. Opting to spend more time with your children just isn't an option for mothers or fathers.

Out of 185 countries reviewed in a 2014 report by International Labour Organization, only two--the United States and Papua New Guinea--did not have public policies for paid maternity leave. The report found that 78 of those countries also mandated paternity leave, with 70 of those providing paid leave to new fathers.

OUT OF 185 COUNTRIES, ONLY TWO--THE UNITED STATES AND PAPUA NEW GUINEA--DON'T HAVE PUBLIC POLICIES FOR PAID MATERNITY LEAVE.

According to figures cited by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Canada guarantees at least 15 weeks of paid maternity leave and 37 weeks shared between both parents, with some cost-sharing as part of the national employment insurance system.

Brazil offers new mothers up to 120 days of paid leave at 100% of salary. Australia offers up to 18 weeks of paid parental leave at a set rate of pay per week. These World Policy Forum maps show more specifics about paid leave for new mothers and fathers.

THE DOL TAKES ON PAID LEAVE

In September, the DOL launched its #LeadOnLeave campaign to promote more widespread paid parental leave for parents of newborn or newly adopted children. While the Family and Medical Leave Act guarantees unpaid, job-protected leave for men and women to care for infants or newly adopted children, as well as their own health needs or seriously ill family members, its unpaid nature makes it difficult for one--and certainly not both--parents to take advantage of.

Currently, three states--California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island--have paid parental leave policies at the state level and some companies also offer it voluntarily, although that's difficult to track accurately.

"I think a lot of our workplace practices and how we do business is stuck in a model where there was somebody taking care of the kids at home and somebody out working. There's been a dramatic change in the way the workforce and working families look," says Latifa Lyles, director of the Women's Bureau at the DOL.

As part of its campaign, the DOL put a little bit of money where its mouth is. The department's Women's Bureau and Employment and Training Administration awarded \$500,000 to the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, Montana, and Rhode Island for feasibility studies on paid leave. In a statement, the DOL said the funds "will inform the development or implementation of paid family and medical leave programs at the state level."

MAKING IT WORK

Concerns from the business sector include the cost of both paying the worker who is out on leave and footing the cost of a replacement. However, Lyles counters that businesses offset the labor cost by reducing turnover and having a more engaged and productive workforce.

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Some have other concerns. Laura Sherbin, executive vice president and director of research at New York City's Center for Talent Innovation, a workplace research firm, says that failure to ensure that men and women take leave equally could leave women at a disadvantage. In Germany women have 14 weeks of fully paid leave, but can be out on protected maternity leave for three years after

having a child. Which means if a woman has have multiple children,

she could be out of the workforce for several years.

"That still leaves women in the difficult position of reentering the workforce after a significant absence," she says.

Overall, Sherbin says that paid leave is good for families and for businesses. According to a 2012 report from the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University, women who reported taking paid leave are more likely to be working nine to 12 months after a child's birth than those who take no leave. In addition, there is a positive correlation between paid parental leave and increased wages following the leave, as well as lower likelihood of receiving public assistance.

As for Masler, while she says her supervisors were very supportive and helped her all they could, the experience of trying to parent an infant while working a full-time job turned her off of employment with a large organization for now. She has launched a life-coaching practice in Ithaca which she says will give her more parenting flexibility.

"No one was unfair to me. It was the totality of the situation of parental leave in this country and in particular, my situation personally. It just didn't work for us," she says.