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Paid Parental Leave in the United States: Helpful or Hurtful to Families?

Of the many topics that are hotly debated in our society, it is widely known that the idea of paid parental leave in the United States is one of the most contentious. The United States is one of the richest, most developed countries in the world, yet we are among a very short list of countries that do not currently offer mandatory paid family leave of any kind, either employer or state supported. But why? How could this be true of a world leading country? In this paper, I hope to identify the set of circumstances that has led to this fierce debate, explain the respective arguments for and against paid family leave, and to also offer my own perspective on the debate from the information I have gathered.

So, how has the idea of paid family leave come about? Well, I would squarely place that on the shoulders of the changing expectations of women in a modern capitalist society. Once upon a time it was possible for a woman to stay home once she had children in order to care for them while her husband was the sole breadwinner for the family. However, the changes in the US economic model have made that idea unfeasible for most families (Geile, 60). Women are expected to work. They are not only expected to work to help pay for the living expenses of the family, but also to help keep themselves and their families off of public assistance if at all possible (Geile, 64). Women don't just work for economic security, but also for emotional satisfaction as well. United States society places a large amount of pressure on women to return to work as soon as possible after having children because workplaces are often inflexible and

women are afraid of losing job seniority or other perks of staying on their career path (Stone 317). But how does this relate to the idea of a mandatory paid parental leave policy in the United States? Simply, it shifts the priority of the parents from having to work to make ends meet to having the ability to care for their new children. If one doesn't have to worry about how the rent will be paid because your employer still pays you, say, 80% of your income for 6 months after giving birth or adopting then families can focus more on bonding and becoming a tight family unit. Strong families make a strong society. It also gives first time parents the ability to adjust to the new form of the family without having to worry about basic necessities.

There would be many financial benefits to families in the United States if there were a mandatory paid parental leave policy. Currently it costs an average of \$12,000 per year to raise a baby for the first year of its life, and that is for a perfectly healthy normal baby (Harris, 2017). I'm sure we can all agree that that is quite a lot of money! On top of that is the nearly \$10,000 for a run of the mill labor and delivery (let's hope you have good insurance) (Harris, 2017). But many families in our society simply cannot afford to shell out that amount while taking unpaid time off of work to care for said child. To put it mathematically, moms medical cost + baby cost + lost wages from lack of work = extreme financial strain and emotional stress on the family. In essence, this is the time when families need their income the most, not a time where they should be financially punished for having a baby.

Physically speaking, there is also a lot of support for mothers to take maternity leave. Women who take maternity leave are less prone to depressive tendencies. Women who return to work within the first few months of giving birth are shown to have higher rates of respiratory, gynecological, and breast illnesses (Parr 13). Physical benefits to babies are also highly noted. Women who take maternity leave often have better and longer periods of breastfeeding and their

babies have lower rates of infant mortality and higher rates of professional care and vaccinations (Gault et al 14). There are also studies showing positive emotional effects for fathers who take paternity leave. Men who take at least 2 weeks of paternity leave often are more involved in caretaking tasks for the child and it has shown to reduce family strain (Gault et al 15). Paid parental leave policies in the United States could go a long way to boosting the numbers of parents who take advantage of leave times and could effectively strengthen families financially and emotionally as a result.

Economics doesn't have to take a back seat in the talk about benefits of a paid parental leave policy. Paid family leave policies could very well increase women's presence in the labor force and less dependence on social welfare programs (Gault et al 12). If women know that they don't have to outright quit their jobs because they can currently only take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act, they are more likely to take advantage of such paid leave options and keep their jobs over the long term. It is also a benefit to families across socio-economic lines; people who may not work for companies who offer paid leave voluntarily will have more options when they have a baby (Miller 2015).

As with most things, there are two sides to every story. Opponents of instituting paid parental leave cite that it will result in loss of productivity and higher costs to employers. They need to find workers to fill in the gaps when an employee takes parental leave. On average, it costs anywhere from \$2,000 to \$14,000 to replace an employee, based on the difficulty of the work and status level (Gault et al 10). In some respects, they have a point. For example, in Sweden it has been shown that women take advantage of paid leave policies far more than men do, even though they are allowed the same benefits (Calder 2017). Overall, the Nordic model of paid family leave has proven to be expensive, with a high tax model to pay for it (Gupta 84).

One thing that we have learned from workplaces that voluntarily offer paid family leave policies in the United States is that the main harms of the proposed programs aren't really based in finances or productivity: women who take maternity leave are often stigmatized in the workplace. Women who take advantage of a company's paid leave benefits are shown to not be promoted as quickly as people who do not take leave (McGregor 2014). Those who shift to part time work often face significant penalties and feelings of career derailment and general dissatisfaction (Stone 320). Women will take the leave that they are entitled to by company policy, but upon returning they find that they are no longer on track for promotions and receive little help from management to rectify the situation. In general women who take leave end up making less money overall (McGregor 2014). This can be especially hurtful to single parent families where the mother is the sole breadwinner.

Companies often frown upon women who take advantage of flexible arrangements (McGregor 2014), and while they cannot punish them formally, they are punished socially. Co-workers are a factor when a person chooses to take family leave. In many cases an employer will choose not to incur the cost of hiring a temporary worker to replace an employee on leave and instead shift their workload onto other employees of the company (Gault et al 11). When that is the case, it can create feelings of resentment against the person taking leave, since it results in a much-increased workload for others for a prolonged period of time. There can also be feelings of animosity from people who do not/cannot/choose not to have children. They tend to see paid leave as a perk only offered to people with children and resent the fact that there is not such leave taking programs in place for them. These feelings tend to result in social sanctions and isolation from co-workers.

It is illegal in the United States for companies to discriminate against a woman for reasons of pregnancy and pregnancy related issues. However, it is often difficult if not impossible to prove discriminatory practices when they are subtle and universally acceptable in US society at large. Women are often placed in the difficult position of choosing between their careers and their families, and many end up simply opting out of work instead of facing a constant uphill battle when they will never get anywhere (Stone 322).

There are currently five states (and one district) that have passed paid family leave laws in the United States: California, New York, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Washington, and Washington D.C (Nolo). Perhaps one of the best examples of paid family leave policies in the United States is California. California enacted their leave laws in 2002 and is modeled on top of the state disability insurance. The California program is entirely employee funded, so businesses and the state incur little to no cost for it (Parr 49). The number of lower income Californian women who took parental leave since the law was enacted is significant. On top of that, women in the state who did take the paid leave were 6% more likely to be working a year later and also worked 15-20% more hours as well (Miller 2015). New Jersey modeled their paid parental leave laws after the laws in California (Parr 49).

Washington approved its paid parental leave programs in 2007, but has since not been able to get it off the ground due to lack of funding (Parr 49). The state recently revamped its efforts in trying to get the laws implemented. In early July of this year Governor Jay Inslee signed a bill to offer 12 weeks of paid leave to families after birth or adoption to begin by 2020 (Rowe 2017). While many see it as a positive step, that is still a long time to wait for many Washington state families. The program is structured similarly to many health insurance policies offered in workplaces, where both the employee and the employer pay into a program (Rowe

2017). The program is also designed to help lower income families take leave when welcoming a new baby.

Many companies in the United States have seen the shortcomings of the state when it comes to paid parental leave and have taken measures of their own. Companies such as Microsoft, Netflix, and Amazon have all put in place policies offering up to five months of paid parental leave to both is female and male employees (O'Connor 2016). Companies are using these policies as recruitment and retention measures and they seem to be working, as Twitter and Etsy have joined the bandwagon as well. People who are allowed to take paid family leave are shown to be more dedicated to their jobs (Gault et al 8). If they feel a company cares about their well-being, they are more likely to remain with the company. These companies know that to remain competitive and to keep highly skilled workers that they need to stay on top of offering benefits their prospective employees want. Otherwise, they risk losing out on skilled labor to their competitors. Though it is prudent to point out that many of these policies are only offered for the elite. Many companies, such as Starbucks and Walmart, only offer paid parental leave to its top-level employees (May 2017). Millions of Americans still don't qualify for or are not offered this benefit, with 1 in 4 new mothers returning to work 10 days after giving birth (May 2017).

It isn't only companies who offer this perk. Many countries throughout the world offer paid parental leave programs. Countries like Germany, France, Denmark, Norway, and Spain all offer 100% paid parental leave for a period ranging 14-18 weeks (Parr 9). Other European countries offer at least partially paid leave. Britain currently offers up to 52 weeks of mostly paid leave (Miller 2015)! These countries view paid leave as a social issue, constructing their policies so businesses do not have to pay the brunt of leave benefits (Parr 10). The United States is one of

only eight countries in the world that does not offer some form of paid parental leave, and the only one that is considered a high-income country (Gault et al 2).

Given all the information for and against instituting a paid parental leave policy in the United States, I cannot see how our society can go on functioning without one. The US has long proclaimed itself a world leader, yet in this issue we have severely fallen behind and the ones paying the price are families. The United States has a very high infant and mother mortality rate for a developed country, and this issue could be a contributing factor. Through my research I have found that women who are able to take advantage of paid parental leave benefits have on average healthier babies. The women themselves also suffer from less mental and physical ailments. Fathers who take paid leave are able to bond with their children to create a stronger family unit.

Arguments against instituting a federal paid leave program don't seem to hold much weight in light of examples from not only other countries around the world, but from the states themselves. Women who are able to take paid parental leave are less likely to be on welfare, and can't we all agree that that is a good thing? It is also shown to increase workforce participation and job dedication, which is something that has been severely lacking. The federal government may very well just be able to shift those available resources to parental leave programs. In the end, I simply must support the position of the United States having paid parental leave. It is shameful for a country that was once considered the greatest country in the world to not take care of its citizenry on such a fundamental level. The United States has long had an "every man for himself" ideology and if we want to keep up in a fast-paced globalized world we will have to change our attitudes.

I would argue that the biggest issue facing the enactment of paid parental leave would not be financial, but social. What we need to change is the stigmatizing mindset against persons who take parental leave. Having a baby does not mean that one is less dedicated to their job or that they can no longer perform the basic functions (or above and beyond even) of their positions. The only way this necessary paradigm shift can come about it through normalizing more extended periods of parental leave taken by both men and women. This issue goes deeper than just the matter of who will pay for the leave and how; the US is a very wealthy country and could manage the policy if we so choose. The issue is very deeply seated in our archaic views of gender normative roles. Currently women bear most of the social burden of taking family leave (McGregor 2014). Men all over the world take less parental leave than women, even when the offerings are equal (Parr 9). Men are simply expected to take less leave when they have a baby, thus resulting in stress at home. Many times, women simply choose to opt out of work to care for their children because their husbands' careers take priority (Stone 321). Women who work are expected to be able to work the same hours and schedules as men do, whether they have a baby or not. Not having a paid parental leave policy is merely a social device to keep women out of the workplace. If men were encouraged to take the leave time as well, perhaps much of the social stigma against working mothers would go away. Indeed, it has been found that men who take at least 2 weeks of parental leave are given *more* job opportunities because they are seen as good fathers and family providers in their workplace. What a crazy double standard.

To conclude, it seems that that pros far outweigh the cons when debating paid parental leave in the United States. But there is still more work to be done. First and foremost, we need to include men in this debate. Even at companies where paid parental leave is offered, men still are only allotted half of what women are usually given, and of that they usually only take half of the

time they have been granted (on average 10 days) (Greenfeild 2016). We also need to stop thinking about paid parental leave as a benefit only granted to the elite of our society. Equity of access to leave policies can greatly enhance the living conditions of people of lower socio-economic status (Gault et al 30). States that do offer paid parental leave need to educate people that these policies exist. In California, more than half of qualifying workers were unaware that these benefits were available to them, and these were the people who stood to benefit the most (Gault et al 30). If we can manage to equalize, normalize, and in effect destigmatize paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers in the workplace, then perhaps the United States can one again proudly call itself a world leader.

Works Cited

Calder, Vanessa Brown. "How paid family leave hurts women." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 30 May 2017. Web. 29 July 2017.

This is an opinion article published by CNN. In it, Calder lays out some facts in argument for and against paid parental leave policies in the US. Critics claim that it would result in lost labor and increased medical insurance costs for companies. Calder offers alternative solutions to these problems, such as tax benefits to companies who offer flexible arrangements for working parents. Calder does not support the idea of government mandated paid leave policies, claiming that in places such as California that female unemployment more than doubled after instituting their laws. She also points out that these types of laws create "a system based glass ceiling." This article was helpful in establishing that there is a firm argument against paid parental leave laws in the United States. Though it isn't considered scholarly, I think it is a good idea to understand opposing opinions on the matter in order to offer a more well-rounded argument.

Gault, Barbara, Heidi Hartmann, Ariane Hagawisch, Jessica Milli, and Lindsey Reichlin. *Paid Parental Leave in the United States*. Institute for Women's Policy Research, Mar. 2014. Web. 29 July 2017.

<https://www.dol.gov/wb/resources/paid_parental_leave_in_the_united_states.pdf>.

This is a scholarly article commissioned by the Department of Labor Women's Bureau and published by the Institute for Women's Policy Research. This article contains a plethora of research in support of paid family leave policies, including the health benefits and economic benefits of paid leave policies. The authors thoroughly research

paid parental leave policies worldwide and examine how the FMLA and various state parental paid leave policies interact, including a full chart on the subject. The authors also lay out recommendation on paid leave policies, such as increasing access to men and well and those of lower socio-economic status. This article was extremely helpful in writing this project as it has a large amount of factually based data to draw upon, while offering multiple view points on the debate of paid parental leave policies. It is well researched and has thorough information. In the end, this article helped me establish my view of arguing for instituting paid parental leave policies in the US because of its well laid out arguments and findings.

Giele, Janet Z. "Decline of the Family: Conservative, Liberal, and Feminist Views." *Family in Transition*. Ed. Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick. Boston: Pearson Education, 2014. Print.

In this article, the author goes into great detail of the opposing views of conservatives, liberals, and feminists on matters pertaining to the general health of the American Family. While conservatives tend to believe that the family is in decline because of decreased moral standards among citizens, liberals believe that it is the changes in the economy and lack of government programs that have caused troubles. Feminists have a unique view of the issue resting with lack of community support and inflexible workplaces. Given the changes in the economic state of the US and the way the capitalist society works there are increased demands on women to join the workforce and stay there, but there is also a systematic lack of support on almost every level. This article is significant to my paper because it helps establish the idea that there are societal

conditions that make being a parent in US society difficult and helps illustrate the need for structural change in supporting families.

Greenfield, Rebecca. "Why Men Are Scared to Take Paternity Leave." *Bloomberg.com*.

Bloomberg, 10 Oct. 2016. Web. 31 July 2017.

In this article the author reveals the fact that many men are not comfortable taking parental leave when they have a baby, even when it is offered by their companies.

Greenfield shows that statistically, men are only offered half as much parental leave as women and on average they only take half of the time offered to them (about 10 days).

Greenfield argues that men need to be offered an equal number of days as women and that might help reduce stigma associated with taking parental leave. She also points out that families fare better overall when fathers take paternity leave. This article helped me establish the argument that equalization between men and women is crucial in instituting paid parental leave in the US.

Gupta, Nabanita Datta, Nina Smith, and Mette Verner. "PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE: The impact of Nordic countries' family friendly policies on employment, wages, and children." *SpringerLink*. Springer US, 04 Jan. 2008. Web. 29 July 2017.

This is a scholarly article that examines the paid parental leave policies in the Nordic countries of Europe, who have long served as an international model of social support. This article goes in depth with charts, statistics, and empirical data to inform the readers of how these policies have impacted societal, family, and business structure. This piece was helpful in examining the argument for instituting paid parental leave laws in

the US by putting it on a global scale. It was also helpful to see both the benefits and harms other countries have experienced as a result of their laws on the subject.

Harris, Diane. "The Cost of Raising a Baby." *Parenting*. N.p., 23 Aug. 2016. Web. 27 July 2017.

The author of this article gives a very frank and straightforward average cost analysis on how much it costs to raise a baby from birth to one year in the US. Harris also gives a description of what medical and delivery charges look like on average in the US backed by data from the Kaiser Family Foundation. The significance of this article in regards to this project is that it helps to show how expensive giving birth and caring for a baby can be and to stress the point that this is not the time when families should be denied wages. It takes a lot to care for a child and parents should be supported.

May, Ashley. "Paid family leave is an elite benefit in the U.S." *USA Today*. Gannett Satellite Information Network, n.d. Web. 27 July 2017.

This article examines how many top US companies have instituted paid parental leave policies, but only for their corporate level employees. The article goes in depth to point out that hourly employees, upon whose backs many of these companies has been built, are not eligible for benefits that they desperately need. What I love about this article is that it shows that class is a major factor in the debate for paid parental leave: it should not be a perk offered only to those who are in the elite of corporate society. If a company offers paid parental leave, it should be offered to all employees, not a select few.

Miller, Claire Cain. "The Economic Benefits of Paid Parental Leave." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 30 Jan. 2015. Web. 29 July 2017.

In this article, Miller lays out both sides of the economic argument for and against paid parental leave policies. Some people say that instituting paid parental leave policies puts undue financial burdens on businesses. Miller examines the places in the US that already have instituted paid leave policies, such as California. She finds that in these places the policies have greatly benefited the lower paid women in the workforce who might have otherwise simply dropped out of working all together if not for the paid leave laws. Using statistical data and information gathered from various university studies, Miller relays the fact that women who are able to take paid leave are more likely to return to work, be more dedicated to their jobs, and even work more hours than they did before. This article was a great economic perspective piece, helping me establish both sides of the argument for and against instituting paid leave policies. It is also a very current article from a reputable source, so I feel comfortable about the information presented in it. Miller thoroughly cites her sources as well.

McGregor, Jena. "When 'good' maternity leave programs can actually hurt women." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 06 Nov. 2014. Web. 27 July 2017.

The information in this article is backed by research done by the consulting firm Mercer. The research found that companies who boasted benefits such as paid maternity leave and flexible work schedules had a higher number of female employees, but also that women were promoted at a slower pace. The study finds the flaw to be with companies who offer said programs, but do nothing to help mothers get back on

promotion tracks when they come back from their leave. There is also a stigma against women who take such leave and, while a company may offer paid maternity leave it can often be frowned upon for it to be taken. This article is helpful because it shows the struggles that working mothers face in an uncaring workplace and shows that while structurally these benefits may be offered, taking them results in penalties.

O'Connor, Clare. "These Companies All Boosted Paid Parental Leave In 2016." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 30 Dec. 2016. Web. 30 July 2017.

This article published by Forbes outlines the many companies that have been voluntarily instituting paid parental leave policies. O'Connor paints out that many of these companies are using these benefits to recruit and retain the highly skilled millennial workforce. I used the information in this article to illustrate the fact that many large companies are wise to the fact that this is a policy that workers need and they are doing their best to cater to that need. Indeed, many of the companies on this list are consistently highly ranked in lists of great companies to work for. Though this article also hits home the point that paid parental leave remains a benefit only available to white collar or elite workers and remains out of reach for those of lower educational or socio-economic levels.

"Paid Family Leave Benefits." *Www.nolo.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 July 2017.

This is a website for a legal encyclopedia with links explaining what states currently have paid parental leave benefits. It offers links to information about each of five states and the District of Columbia and what the history and details are of each state

leave laws. This website was very helpful in establishing more current information on what states have these laws in place, as many scholarly sources have not been updated to include them. It is useful to note that even though the US at large does not have paid parental leave policies, some states have taken it upon themselves to support their citizenry.

Parr, Amanda. *Parental Leave: Policy and Practice*. Scholar Commons. University of Southern Florida, Jan. 2012. Web. 29 July 2017.

<<http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5578&context=etd>>.

This is a scholarly article published by Scholar Commons and the University of Southern Florida. In it, Parr examines paid parental leave policies worldwide. She also examines the benefits of paid leave policies on the health and wellness of families. Parr offers arguments to improve the FMLA and parental leave policies in the US. This article was helpful in establishing my own position in arguing for the institution of paid parental leave policies and offering scholarly support to that argument. The author calls for more extensive research to be done on the subject of paid parental leave policies and called for workplaces to begin restructuring how they accommodate families, to which I agree.

Rowe, Claudia. "Washington's new family-leave law is among the most generous in the nation." *The Seattle Times*. The Seattle Times Company, 06 July 2017. Web. 30 July 2017.

This article explains the proposed actions in the paid parental leave laws approved in Washington state in July of this year. Under the law, employees and employers will

both pay into a system that will guarantee pay for 12 weeks to new mothers and fathers. Lower wage workers will be able to collect up to 90% of their pay. This article was relevant because the laws approved in Washington are considered extremely progressive, even more so than California. This is a very recent action and will not be instituted until 2020 under current plans and scholarly sources have not examined them fully yet. It helps to illustrate the point that these are laws that people are asking for. It is also an interesting perspective in that this program is being built from scratch, unlike California and the other states with paid leave laws that are built upon state disability. This article helped to build support in the argument for paid parental leave.

Stone, Pamela. "The Rhetoric and Reality of "Opting Out."” *Family in Transition*. Ed. Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick. Boston: Pearson Education, 2014. Print.

Pamela Stone offers a bleak outlook for the most powerful of working women who choose to be mothers. Workplaces are inflexible and uncaring to the plight of women who, though they are wealthy enough to pay for childcare, would like to be able to be more hands-on in the raising of their children. The women that Stone interviewed for her work on this topic were all forced to choose either work or family, so in essence they really never had any choice. This article is relevant to my project because it establishes that there is a need for better leave policies and more support for women and families in the workplace.