

# American Exceptionalism and Lack of Paid Leave - Through the Gender Lens

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# Questions

- The US has mandated unpaid family leave. What is wrong with that?
- Lots of countries mandate paid family leave. Why not the US?
- What will it take for there to be a serious debate about national paid parental leave available to all?

# Importance of the gender lens

- How are gendered norms, beliefs and values responsible for US leave policy?
- How is male dominance in government and business responsible for the policy lag?
- What changes in gender expectations might stimulate policy change?

# 1993 Family & Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

12 weeks unpaid leave per year for:

- Care of child during first year
- Care of seriously ill family member
- Own serious illness

Job security

Continued health coverage

# FMLA accomplishments

- 1<sup>st</sup> federal law to grant leave for caregiving
- Gender neutral (necessary since Civil Rights Act)
- Challenges norm of ideal worker
- Challenges norm of employer control of work schedule
- Overcame business opposition

# FMLA problems

- Unpaid –no improvement in women’s employment outcomes
- Too short – no subsidized ECEC
- Limited coverage
  - Must work for employers with 50+ workers
  - Requires 1 year job tenure
  - Excludes 50% of private sector workers
- Company noncompliance/lack of knowledge
  - No paternity leave – 1/3
  - No maternity leave – 1/4

# FMLA & parental leave use

- Only 1/5 use FMLA to care for babies
- Men take 1 week, women take 2 months
- 2/3 receive some pay mainly by using up other benefits (e.g., vacation)
- Leave ineffective as support for new parents
- Policy reinforces traditional division of labor for childcare

# Paid parental leave access

Available to 12% of full-time workers

- State-provided – federalist model

5 states, covers ¼ in those states; 50% pay, paid by employees or employees + employers

- Employer-provided – historic reliance on company benefits

77% Americans think employers should administer leave

Available with job tenure to professional & managerial workers.

E.g: 60% of college-educated women have paid maternity leave vs 22% other women



# Why US lags behind

- Cultural obstacles
- Economic obstacles
- Political obstacles

# Cultural obstacles

- Ideal family norms
  - Essentialist perceptions of women as mothers
  - Intensive parenting norm
  - 57% fathers: men should **not** have the same rights as women to parental leave
- Gendered division of labor
  - 95% fathers vs. 67% mothers with children under 6 work for pay
  - mothers spend twice as much time as fathers on caregiving
- Religious support for patriarchal family – states with paid leave have fewer evangelical Christians
- Ideology about children – parent's private responsibility

# Economic obstacles

- Ideal worker norm
  - Men discouraged from participating in caregiving
  - Women penalized for pursuing career success
- Strong business opposition to government intervention and successful lobbying
  - despite lack of negative impact of paid leave in states
- No interest in a “business case”

# Political obstacles

- Antipathy to government involvement in family life - Liberal welfare regime, based on privatized care model
- No policy debate on gender and caregiving or ideal worker norm
- Liberal feminist bias – focus on individual opportunity, women should act like men to succeed
- Women have little power – only 9% of senior managers, 19% of Congress, states with paid leave have more women legislators
- Workers have little power - only 10% unionized
- Low labor standards
- Path dependency – past developments constrain future developments

# What could bring about a debate for national policy change ?

Political, economic and cultural drivers –

- Obama administration is speaking out
- Proposal in Congress to extend social security to cover paid family leave (FAMILY act)
- More states taking action
- Democratic win in 2016

# More women in power



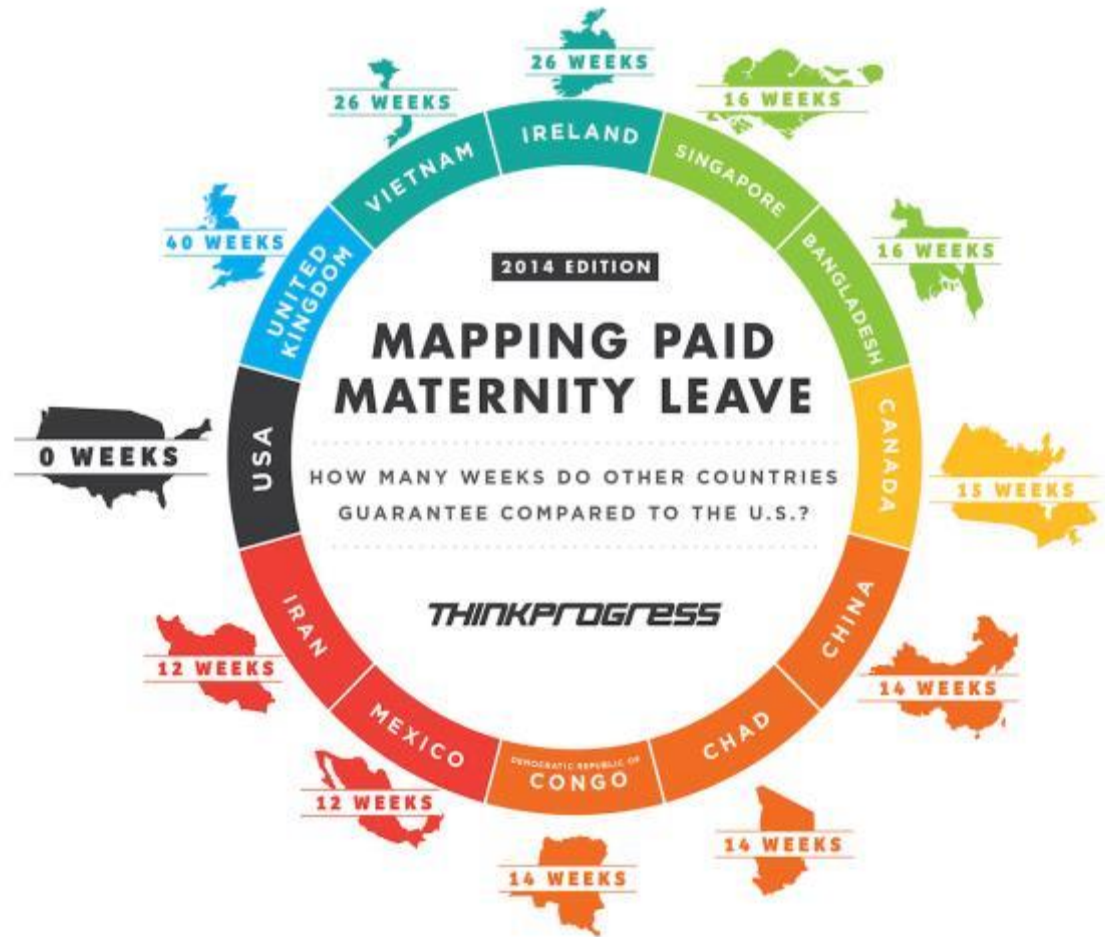
# More attention to business case

NETFLIX

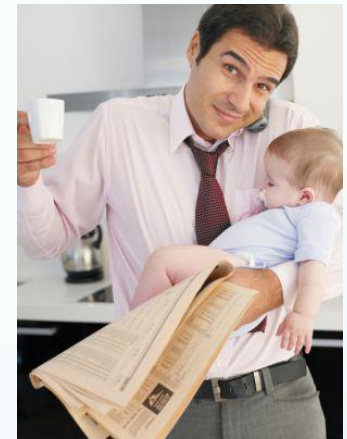


Microsoft

Google



# Media attention on working fathers





# Recognition of 'millennial challenge'

- Young people hold egalitarian attitudes
- Anticipate problems living egalitarian lives
- Expect to forego childbearing -> baby bust?



# Still missing: gender lens

- Gender logics within policy regimes need closer analysis, not just what gets negotiated in families or workplace
- US economic and political institutions are heavily influenced by traditional gender norms, beliefs and values supporting a privatized care model vs the dual-earner/dual-caregiver family
  - Ideal worker norm
  - Ideal family norm
  - Short-term focus on profitability vs. social sustainability & caring
- Women's lack of power in government and work organizations reflects and reproduces the lack of social policy
- Need to recognize that improvement in women's status involves not just shared breadwinning but shared caregiving with men

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