

Forum: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UNW)

Issue #2: Addressing Maternal Leave Policies and its Impacts on the Work-Life Balance on Women

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Introduction

Maternity leave is time off granted to women who just gave birth so that they can properly recover and bond with their children. As demonstrated by a study conducted by the National Library of Medicine, proper maternity leave is associated with reduced risk of postpartum depression. Countries have different policies regarding maternity leave, which can greatly impact the support new mothers feel their workplace offers them. Maternity leave is crucial in supporting working mothers and promoting gender equality in the workplace. After returning from maternity leave, some women still experience multiple challenges in balancing their new work-life situation. Despite the multiple benefits that proper maternity leave offers, there are still many complaints regarding the longevity of maternity leave, as well as difficulty finding flexibility regarding their work hours. The International Labor Organization established standards for maternity leave such as a minimum of 12 weeks leave, however recommending 14. Covid-19 has also impacted maternity leave by things such as baby classes being canceled and access to childcare being harder to access. The pandemic has also shed light on the issue of financial insecurity while on maternity leave, various women have had to return early from their leave which highlights the importance of paid maternity leave, this has caused an increased number of calls for policies that guarantee a minimum of 12 weeks paid leave. Some countries have already implemented longer paid maternity leaves which has had positive impacts on mothers such as decreased depression symptoms, improved health, and increased parental bonding. Although positive advancements have been made, there are still several ways to improve maternity leave policies to help women with their work-life balance.

Definition of Key Terms

Exploitation: treating someone in an unethical/inhumane way to profit off their work

Postpartum depression: hormonal changes that cause new mothers depression after childbirth.

Childcare: provision of care towards children while guardian works

Child support: court order payments made towards noncustodial parents; payments support the child/children until the age of 18

Armed Conflict: tensions/conflict between groups within a state involving weaponry

General Overview

Lack of Education about Childbirth and Care

The lack of education about childbirth and care heavily impacts maternity leave and the work-life balance of women. Without proper knowledge, many women are unaware of their rights and benefits, leading to mismanaged time off and premature returns to work, often without adequate recovery. A British survey done by YouGov states that 50% of employees are unaware of their maternity/paternity leave. This lack of preparation also makes balancing work and the demands of a newborn more stressful, resulting in burnout and decreased job satisfaction. Long-term career impacts include missed professional opportunities and potential employer perceptions of reduced commitment. Psychosocial effects, such as postpartum depression, PTSD, and Anxiety, further strain the balance. Comprehensive prenatal and postnatal education programs, along with supportive workplace policies, are essential to improve health, well-being, and career sustainability for women.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a profound impact on maternal leave policies worldwide, highlighting existing challenges and introducing new ones that affect the work-life balance of women. Financial hardships faced by businesses during the pandemic led some to reduce benefits, including maternity leave, to cut costs. A statistic by NWLC states that only 46% of mothers have gotten their jobs replaced from the pandemic, compared to 76% of fathers. Due to COVID-19, things like baby classes have been canceled, access to child support has become difficult and the arrangement of childcare has been time-consuming. These financial pressures have led women to return to work or to enter unemployment. Pregnant women and new mothers faced additional health risks, with concerns about workplace safety and the health of their infants. While remote work became more common, increased in who could take maternity leave and under what conditions, influencing job security and work-life balance.

Insufficient Childcare Support

Childcare is essential for a healthy work-to-life balance for mothers, without that sufficient care they are unable to form the necessary bonds and actions with their children. Research in the US done by the ECPP (Early Childhood Program Participation Survey) in 2016 finds that half of families state that finding childcare has become difficult, consequently affecting the employment of women who try to find appropriate childcare. Between 1990 and 2015, childcare grew 175%, reaching the point of being unaffordable. Childcare has gotten to the point where mothers have to rely on family or unreliable sources to assist with childcare. The availability and affordability of childcare are critical in enabling mothers to achieve a healthy work-life balance. The increase in childcare costs has forced mothers to lose their independence and become insecure in their economic stability. Addressing these issues is essential for supporting working

mothers in a time of economic distress and instability

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

The United States is currently the only developed country that doesn't have a national paid parental leave policy. By 2013, all countries that formed part of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) offered national paid leave policy, except the US. OECD countries with national paid parental leave policies offer a minimum of 4 months of paid leave, which allows for new mothers to spend time bonding and caring for their newborns without the added financial burden. According to the National Library of Medicine, "As many as 23% of employed mothers return to work within ten days of giving birth, because of their inability to pay living expenses without income." This shows that unpaid maternity leave poses a problem in the US labor force due to the financial burden of unpaid leave, forcing mothers to return to work earlier than recommended. This increases the risk for postpartum depression, as well as an increase in infant mortality.

Australia

Australia has a government-funded parental leave pay called the Paid Parental Leave Scheme, to be eligible employees must have earned less than \$151,350 in the last financial year. Currently, it provides 20 weeks of payment for their child and has 2 weeks reserved for each parent, this payment consists of Australia's minimum wage. Starting July 1st, 2024, 2 weeks of paid leave will be added to the parental leave policy up until 2026. According to Time Magazine in Australia, "Australia's Senate just passed legislation on Monday to extend its total paid

leave offered to new parents to 26 weeks, instead of the current 20 weeks, beginning in 2026." The policy of paid leave in Australia has an amendment to the number of parental leave that a family can take together, which is now 4 weeks. This amendment recognizes the importance of appropriate time for both parents to bond with the child and be able to divide the duties equally. In Australia, pregnant employees also have the right to take unpaid maternity leave if they are deemed unfit to work, employees also are entitled to 2 days of unpaid pre-adoption leave so that they can prepare and have all of their affairs in order when the child arrives.

Canada

In Canada, maternity leave is only given to people who have given birth and require time off before and after childbirth to be able to recover. The father or parents who are adopting have the chance to apply for parental leave instead of maternity leave. As stated by the *Canada Labour Code*, Canada has a maternity leave policy that allows new mothers to have up to 15 weeks of paid maternity leave, which is 55% of the employee's income. Mothers planning maternity leave must notify their employers at least 4 weeks in advance with an estimated end date, with an exception being made in case of emergencies. In Canada, it is also illegal for employers to terminate an employee during either maternal or parental leave. Canada has one of the highest rates of female labor force participation among OECD countries, which shows why they have an interest in keeping them in the work field.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria offers 410 days of maternity leave per child which, according to the EuroDev group, is a generous amount of time. The first 135 days are divided into 3 periods, 45 days before giving birth, 42 days immediately after giving birth, and 48 days after the mother has been released from the hospital. This extensive leave allows mothers to bond with their children, establish routines properly, and

greatly reduce the risk of postpartum depression. The entirety of the leave is paid up to 90% of the mother's salary which ensures financial stability during this time. As mentioned by the EuroDev group, after the child reaches six months of age, the remaining time may be split between both parents after acquiring the mother's explicit consent.

Estonia

Estonia is considered to have the most comprehensive maternity leave in the world. Estonia offers up to 140 days of paid maternity leave, and it pays 100% of a woman's salary from their past year of employment. According to the European Commission, "If a parent worked in another EU country in the previous calendar year and received no income in Estonia, the parental benefit is designated at the minimum wage rate". All employed mothers in Estonia are eligible for paid maternity leave including employees with temporary contracts that have a duration longer than 1 month. Estonia also offers employment protection to women who are pregnant or have a child that is up to 3 years old. There has been fully paid leave in Estonia since 1970 which shows Estonia's long-lasting commitment to supporting mothers to find their work-life balance.

Timeline of Events

Date

Description of event

1800	In the late 1800's the idea that there should be a limit to the amount of time spent working was introduced, and manufacturing laws restricted women's and children's working hours.
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1938	The Fair Labor Standards Act was established. This act decreed that there was to be a 44-hour work week, with the exception only to medical professionals who still needed to be on call beyond this time.
1980	In the 1980's the Women's Liberation Movement ensured that work-life balance was important to companies to be able to accommodate women. During this time maternity leave and flexibility in the workplace gained popularity.
1993	The FMLA Act was signed, which provided eligible employees with up to 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave.
2000	In 2000 Scandinavian countries implemented maternity leave policies that aimed to be comprehensive to a mother's work-life balance. These policies included job protection which would ensure that women who took maternity leave would come back to the same position that they had left with.
2010	The Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010 ensured employees were given adequate time to breastfeed and this act also provided subsidies to help make coverage more affordable for lower-income individuals. During this time China also extended their maternity leave from 90 days to 98 days to help working mothers manage their work-life balance.
2020	The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of paid maternity leave which made many countries implement or expand paid family leave programs. During the pandemic, multiple companies also explored the option of remote work to support employees during the difficult times.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) 1993 is the act that provided 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave in the United States to a selective amount of employees. To be eligible for maternity leave you have to be an employee for a total of 12 months and have a minimum of 1250 hours of service. Although this act ensures the maternity leave of women, many states chose to apply their maternity leave legislation, most like New York, Colorado, etc. States like Hawaii and Wisconsin pick to have a minimum of 4 weeks of unpaid maternity leave.

Maternity Protection Convention, 2000. The International Labor Organization created a convention that went into depth about the protection of Health, employment, maternity leave, and the benefits they are allowed to have. They also mention other separate logistics such as the implementation and final provisions. They took into consideration other past conventions like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Beijing Declaration, and the Platform for Action (1995). The International Labor Organization's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up (1998), etc. to create a more efficient solution to the lack of proper maternity leave.

UN involvement

In terms of protecting the right to maternity leave, there is little the UN committees can do other than advocate for the dangers that maternity can pose to women when not provided with adequate time to recover. UNFPA, UNDP, UNW, etc. Studies like the Act of the Republic of Indonesia, Number 13, 2003, Article 82. Indonesian policy for maternity leave and their work-to-life balance was studied by UNDP Indonesia on how well-made their policies were,

but they still didn't highlight some aspects of women's work life. UNW highlights the importance of Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages through SDG 3. Their SDG targets are implemented to recognize that gender discrimination limits access to healthcare and financial stability. Similarly to UNW, UNFPA advocates for reproductive health services, as well as providing these services through governmental assistance. For example, released news on May 29th, 2024 on how they provided emergency maternity and psychological care to women and girls in Afghanistan. They highlighted how important it is to support them in a time of distress and emotional/physical disturbance. These UN committees understand the importance of activism and action, often implemented at different levels in each committee.

Possible Solutions

Protecting the rights of maternal leave and creating a healthy Work-To-Life Balance for women as easy as it seems, it can be difficult to find in between that is efficient for both the women and the corporation. A more complex solution would be understudies for those important positions that women hold that can be provided when they fall under pregnancy, they would then be temporarily replaced until the meantime. Another possible solution for those jobs that are mainly directed to the field of STEM, is to work from home. Since COVID-19, many women who had to work from home were able to attend to their children more easily due to their accessibility to childcare. A final solution would be the provision of education about pregnancy. In countries like the US, only 60% of women are eligible for a paid 12 weeks of maternity leave. Some states, like Wisconsin and Hawaii, only provide 4–6 weeks of paid maternity leave. The lack of education on the proper care that women need to receive after childbirth is not often recognized. This lack of education causes misinformation and unrealistic expectations about the recovery of childbirth, as well as bonding with

the offspring.

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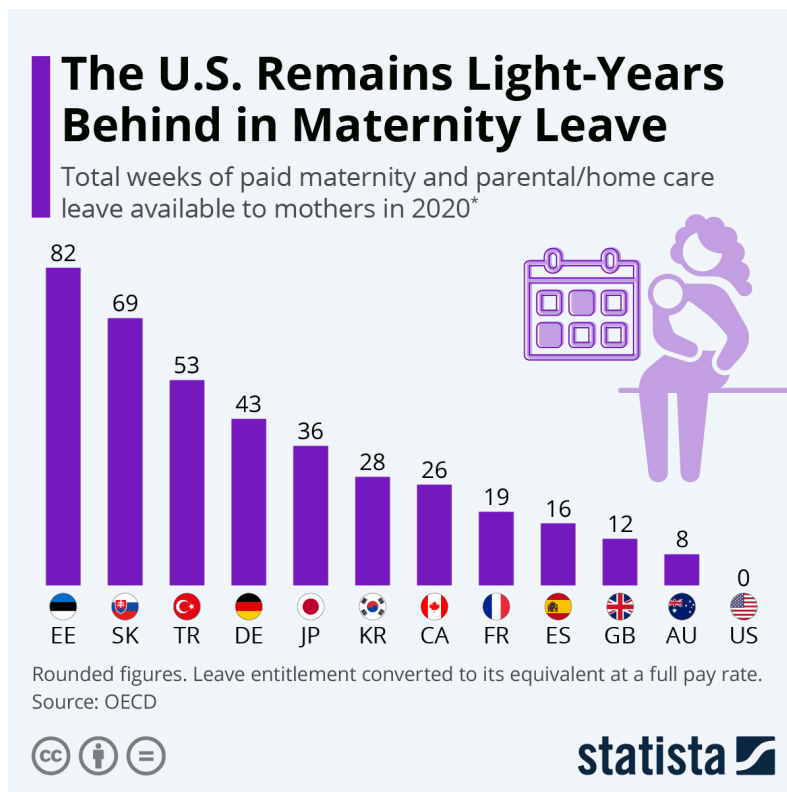
Appendix

- I. https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Moms_RESILIENT_FS-Final-August-2022.pdf
 - A. This article by NWLC provides statistics and stories from working mothers and the impact that COVID-19 had on their work-to-life balance
- II. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/27/maternity-leave-us-policy-worst-worlds-richest-countries>
 - A. This news report provides information on specific maternity leave spans in different countries, including Japan, US, Estonia, etc.
- III. <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/benefits-leave/fmla>
 - A. These US department websites go into the specifics about the Maternity and Medical Leave Act and the eligibility of being approved for the leave. ::
- IV. <https://diversityq.com/50-of-employees-are-unaware-of-their-maternity-paternity-leave-rights/>
 - A. This website provides statistics on employees who are not aware of their parental rights, as well as going in-depth about the rights they have.
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 - A. Maternity Leave in Indonesia, Analyzed by the United Nations

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VI. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/child-care-crisis-keeping-women-workforce/>

A. This article provides research and context on the childcare difficulties that women face in the US. the research was done mainly by ECPP 2016.



VII.

