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IDEAS | ESSAY

Want Equality? Make New Dads Stay Home

Mandatory paternity leave would help close the wage gap and strengthen family bonds



ILLUSTRATION: ALEX NABAUM

By *Joanne Lipman*

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When Jeremy Doyle and his wife had a baby boy last year, he took 12 weeks of paternity leave. Not many new dads take off that much time. But that wasn't what made the San Francisco executive's experience so unusual. This is: His paternity leave was mandatory.

Mr. Doyle's employer, Boston-based people analytics firm Humanyze, is among the first not only to give men and women equal lengths of paid parental leave but to insist that men take it. The firm instituted the policy in 2016 because most men don't take leave even when it's offered, for fear that it will derail their careers. That message—that having a baby will kill your career—isn't lost on women who do take leaves.

“Bias plays such a clear role, we decided we are going to say, ‘It's not an option. You [men] have to take the time off,’” Humanyze co-founder Ben Waber told me. After all, if men and women have to take equal leaves, there's no excuse to penalize either one.

Mr. Waber and his company are on to something. We've been talking about workplace inequality for decades. The conversation has never been more urgent than this past year, with the #MeToo movement training a spotlight not only on sexual abuse but on the broader issue of bias against women.

And yet, all the talk has produced very little visible progress. Yes, some powerful men have lost their jobs. But in other ways, we've gone backward. The percentage of female CEO's of S&P 500 firms has declined over the past year, to less than 5%. The global gender gap widened, as measured by factors including economic opportunity, in 2017 over the previous year, according to the World Economic Forum. In a recent survey by the American Psychological Association, the majority of employees said they'd seen no policy changes in their workplace since the #MeToo movement erupted.

What's needed now is action. Why not start with mandatory paternity leave?

More than a third of American firms offer at least some paid maternity leave, and an increasing number of them are extending such benefits to new dads as well. But paternity leave is useless if men don't take it. A 2018 Deloitte survey of more than 1,000 men found that a third worried that taking a leave would hurt their careers, and more than half feared it would signal that they weren't serious about their jobs. A 2017 Pew survey found that the median paternity leave was



Jeremy Doyle with his one-week-old son; his company required his paternity leave. PHOTO: CARRIE MCCAUGHTRY

just one
week.
New
moms,

meanwhile, typically take whatever time they can get.

That's why the "mandatory" piece for men is key. Most organizations that offer voluntary leave have a "use it or lose it" approach, which, it turns out, actually hurts women, since they are more likely than men to use it. In Denmark, for example, a generous leave policy offers families 52 weeks of paid time off to be split between both parents. Yet in practice, women end up taking 92.8% of the total time, according to the OECD. These women find it almost impossible to climb back on the career track afterward. As a result, even two decades after the birth of their first child, they face a 20% gender wage gap, a 2018 National Bureau of Economic Research working paper concluded.

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Mr. Doyle, who is Humanyze's chief customer officer, was the first new dad to be subject to the mandatory policy. He says that he would never have taken off all that time if it were voluntary. As it was, he took his leave in several chunks, spread out over the course of a year. Still, he faced the stigma of the "obvious social implications and/or gender expectations that everybody contends with around this."

Some people snickered, with "little jabs or jokes," that he must be just goofing off. Others, particularly older relatives, suggested that if he was able to take such a long leave, he "must not be seen as somebody who's important" at work.

In other words, he was treated...just like a woman. And in many ways, that's the point. If leave is normalized for new dads as well as for new moms, it's difficult to stigmatize either one.

Paternity leave is no cure-all. It doesn't solve the core issue, which is that the U.S. is the only industrialized country in the world that doesn't require paid family leave. Most Americans don't have access to any paid benefits when they have a child; they are protected only by the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, which guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid time off.

That burden falls especially heavily on women, who often have to take a leave for medical reasons, who spend more time than men on child care, and who suffer an economic hit when they have children. Michelle Budig, a sociology professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, found in a 30-year longitudinal study of 12,686 people that women's earnings

decrease 4% after the birth of each child—a “motherhood penalty”—while new dads receive more than a 6% bump, known as a “fatherhood bonus,” largely reflecting employer biases.

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But we've got to start somewhere, and the idea of mandatory paternity leave for men is gaining traction. The first person to suggest it to me was Matt Krentz, a senior partner and leader of the Global People Team at Boston Consulting Group. His firm offers new dads two months of paid

leave, but he has been troubled by reports of managers warning men that it will jeopardize their careers if they take it.

“If we pull the guys aside and say, ‘It’s a mistake, it’s going to cost you in your career’ ... you can’t turn around and say to women, ‘Well, it’s OK,’” Mr. Krentz told me. “What it says to women is, ‘When you have a child and you go on maternity leave, you’re impacting and derailing your career.’”

Plenty of men, especially senior executives, take off extended periods of time for other reasons, without any career repercussions. Boston Consulting Group gives partners—most of whom are male—a two-month sabbatical every five years, to do whatever they’d like. When male executives take long medical leaves, no one suggests that they aren’t serious about their jobs. So why should a woman who takes off a few months over the course of her 40-plus-year career face a permanent penalty?

Paternity leave has undeniably positive effects all around. Longer leaves increase the bonding between father and child and lead to better health and cognitive outcomes, a Labor Department report found. It’s also good for moms: A study in Sweden concluded that for every month a father takes off, the mother’s income actually rises by 6.7%, as measured four years later.

None of this is cheap, but the economic benefits can be significant. Four states—California, New York, New Jersey and Rhode Island—have implemented paid family leave laws for both genders. In California, which enacted its policy in 2004, 91% of the employers surveyed reported that it had a neutral or positive impact on profitability and employee performance. Paid leave is also a powerful lever to help to attract and retain talent. It encourages a more gender-balanced workforce, which research shows leads to greater corporate success.

“I can make the business case,” Humanyze’s Mr. Waber told me. “But the moral case is the primary driver for me. It’s the right thing to do.... If [companies] make it work for women, they can make it work for men.”

—Ms. Lipman is the author of *“That’s What She Said: What Men Need to Know (and Women Need to Tell Them) About Working Together.”* She is the former chief content officer of Gannett and editor-in-chief of *USA Today*.

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