

PARENTAL LEAVES

Still low priority

By Wendy Marquiez

On the birth of her daughter, Simona Nielsen took a 26-week maternity leave from her job as a stock trader. Her firm footed half the bill, and the government kicked in the other half. Her husband, also a professional, opted for a two-week leave — at full salary. Both their employers were completely supportive; they considered parental leave a natural and necessary provision for the health of the entire family.

How did the Niensens manage to get such generous benefits when so many new parents can take a fraction of that time — without pay? Where does this couple live? On another planet?

No. They just live in Denmark — where, as in much of the industrialized world, generous maternity, paternity and parental leaves have been standard policy for decades. In fact, last year the Danish government doubled the benefit, giving couples 52 weeks to share between them after the birth of a child; single mothers get 50 weeks.

In comparison, U.S. leave policies seem light years behind.

Social Advocates Say U.S. Leave Benefits Are Sub-Par

The Family Leave and Medical Act (FMLA) of 1993, our first federal policy, requires companies with 50 or more employees to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave once a year (www.dol.gov/esn/whd/fmla). A number of family and medical reasons qualify for FMLA, including birth or adoption of a child. But only 55 percent of the U.S. workforce is covered, and less than 6 percent of eligible employees actually make use of the benefits.

"Most maternity leaves in this country are family hostile," says Julie Shields, an intellectual property attorney, parental-leave activist, and author of *How to Avoid the Mommy Trap: A Roadmap to Sharing Parenting and Making it Work*. "The biggest problem with the FMLA utilization is the fact that it's not paid." Our policies are so sub-par, Shields says, that the United States ranks second to last in parental leave benefits of all industrialized nations. In Sweden, which tops the list, new parents are encouraged to take more than a year off to spend with their infant. They also receive government subsidies while at home, during the early years. A growing number of European countries have enacted these policies "to foster the public interest in raising healthy, secure, productive members of society," Shields says. The majority of Americans, meanwhile, are financially unable to take time off when they need it most. New Yorkers actually have additional benefits, Shields notes, as New York is one of five states with temporary disability insurance programs, providing a modest income for six weeks of leave.



Parental Leave legislation covers dads as well, but how many fathers do you know who have taken it? Currently, despite certain advances in the workplace, only 6 percent of eligible employees — moms and dads — actually make use of the benefits.

But it's a pittance when compared to our neighbors in the European Union, social activism leaders say. And while the reasons we lag so far behind are varied, at the crux, it's a political issue. "The biggest obstacle to getting leave policy changes enacted is getting the votes to support them," says Sheila Kamerman, D.S.W., co-director of the Institute for Child and Family Policy at Columbia University, and an expert in cross-national studies. "It was so difficult getting unpaid family leave enacted, and moving toward paid family leave just requires more political clout."

It's been a subject of a lot of debate, Shields says, "but the political parties don't really want to address the issues, and neither party's position really captures what most people want, which is a package of policies that can help support them. The groups that might speak for better policies tend to be rather fragmented, so there's no one group speaking for parents that could agitate enough."

Flexible Working Arrangements No Longer An Anomaly

Equally as critical as length of leave is creating and maintaining a work-family life balance after having a child, experts say. But some changes are starting to take root at various levels in the system. The "National Study of the Changing Workforce," released last month by the Manhattan-based Families and Work Institute (FWI), reports a number of significant transformations taking place on the job. Flexible working schedules, for example, are no longer the anomaly they were a decade ago. "U.S. employers are changing in response to the new demographics of the workplace," says FWI president Ellen Galinsky, co-author of the study.

Deborah Epstein Henry, an attorney and mother of three, can attest to the changing response. Founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers, a Philadelphia-based support group for lawyers who work a flexible and/or part-time schedule (as well as those considering doing so), Henry worked full-time in Manhattan for eight years before relocating to Philadelphia with her husband in 1997. Pregnant with her second child at the time, Henry decided to aggressively interview for a part-time position. Her credentials and timing were right on the mark, and she easily landed a position as part-time litigator at Schnader Harrison Segal & Lewis, LLP. But Henry's success at balancing work and family life extends beyond her personal story.

Recognizing the benefit that networking and support could provide, Henry invited several other part-time attorneys to a monthly brown bag lunch group to discuss topics relevant to balancing work and family. Guest speakers would occasionally be invited, and the hosting law firm would vary each month to help spread the word. "The reaction was amazing," Henry says. "Within six months, 100 lawyers had emailed me from the City of Philadelphia."

Three years later, Flex-Time lawyers had grown to the point where Henry decided to establish a second chapter in New York City. "It's my home; it's where my connections are," Henry explains, "and the pressures on lawyers trying to seek work-life balance are, in my opinion, greater in New York than in any other city. I felt the need was really compelling and it would be a very valuable resource." Now in its fourth year, Flex-Time Lawyers has a mailing list of over 850 lawyers, over 500 of them in New York City.

Lawyers may be a unique group, but flexible schedules can be created in any field. The key is making yourself invaluable to your organization, Henry says, and that means different things in different professions. "But if you're invaluable, your employer is not

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going to want to lose you."

Shields couldn't agree more. Being a truly valued employee can put you in a position where you're willing to take the chance and speak up for what you want. "People often assume they can't have a flexible work arrangement, so they don't even explore the possibility, yet sometimes they're there for the asking or creating."



Says author Julie Shields: "Most maternity leaves in this country are family hostile."

Karen Bolton, a Manhattan entertainment marketing executive, is a prime example of creating possibilities. Although her company had no part-time policy, she negotiated a two-and-a-half day workweek — at half pay —

when she returned from maternity leave two years ago. Bolton says she focused on making herself invaluable every day, and when the time came to plan her leave, "I presented my case with hard numbers documenting my contribution to the company's business goals" during her five years on board. Her boss backed her up and the part-time job was approved. "I feel very lucky to have the best of both worlds," says Bolton, who credits a supportive supervisor as a key element. "That's the person who has to sell it up the rest of the corporate ladder," she adds.

But Bolton's story has one catch. She was willing to share it only if her name and the name of her employer were not used. Even those who successfully lobby for flexible work schedules are often afraid to broadcast their good news for fear of reprisals, experts say.

"It's the culture of the workplace," Kamerman says. It's considered inappropriate, especially for highly educated, highly skilled professional women. "The policies on paper may be good, but if the culture of senior management doesn't support them, it becomes very difficult for somebody to do it."

Social Changes Needed to Avoid National Crisis

People must start speaking up and speaking louder, author Shields says. "Parents need to make their voices heard everywhere, including in the political process. And we just haven't done it yet. We really have to make it clear that we want a whole package. And it's not just for the stay-at-home mothers, and it's not just for the working mothers; it's really for the children." The biggest crisis we have in this country is that 90 percent of our purchased child care is of inferior quality, Shields notes. "We have tons of research showing that when children are in bad quality child care, they're harmed. And we actually punish parents for taking time out from the workplace, whereas other countries make it easier. We're just not setting up the right system."

"The U.S. lags in a whole series of social policies toward children, and this is just one more," says Kamerman at Columbia. Maintaining the delicate balance between family life and work life is a complicated problem, but as increasing numbers of families find it essential for women to work and bring in a paycheck, "there needs to be more attention and visibility paid to the distress that occurs when these issues are not addressed and when public policies are not responsive."

There are things citizens can do, advocates say. Among them: "When electing members of Congress or senators or presidents, make sure they have a supportive position with regard — in particular — to paid leave," stresses Kamerman. "That's the most important issue." Supporting organizations active in the field is another important step.

But speaking up is number one. "Each time somebody makes known his or her need, that sends a message to the workplace and to society that something needs to change, and often it breaks down some of the barriers that exist," Shields says. "It's just a matter of everybody taking that first step, and then maybe change might happen."

"People at the senior level are going to have to stick their neck out, too, and be supportive," Kamerman says. Women at all phases of their lives are trying to cope with this problem. "It's not an issue that affects only a small group in the population."

Advocacy Organizations and Resources:

- The National Partnership for Work and Families: www.nationalpartnership.org
- Families and Work Institute: www.familiesandwork.org
- MOTHERS: www.mothersoughtohaveequalrights.org
- New York State Division of Human Rights: www.nysdhr.com/pregnant.html
- Citizens Committee for the Children of New York: www.kfsny.org

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