

Case 4

Paid Maternity Leave

Julia and Mark, residents of the German city of Ingolstadt, just had their first child. As they bring their baby girl home, Mark and Julia are eager to spend the next six months away from their jobs to exclusively nurture their new family member. Neither Mark nor Julia are worried about their job security or their ability to pay their bills, for Germany allows parents to take up to 47 weeks of paid leave and ensures that their jobs will be protected during their absence.¹ Meanwhile, Bernardette, a Wal-Mart employee in New Mexico, is back at work five weeks after the birth of her second child. Despite having had a difficult labor and post-partum complications, Bernardette's maternity leave was limited to the vacation and sick days she had accumulated the previous year. Taking a longer leave, like Julia and Mark's, would have jeopardized her job and hence the family's financial health.

Bernardette's case is not unique. In the U.S. only 50% of workers are covered under the Family and Medical Leave Act, which enables new parents to take 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave. Furthermore, according to a Human Rights Watch report released in February of 2011, American working parents and their children are harmed by the absence of legislation guaranteeing paid maternity leave.² In the case of single mothers, say advocates of paid maternity leave, the adverse effects of parenthood increase exponentially.³ According to sociologist Leonard Lopoo, each child a woman has on average increases her probability of being poor by 5.4 percentage points.

In addition to putting new parents in a precarious financial position, the absence of paid maternity leave also affects children. New mothers who return to work shortly after giving birth are less likely to breastfeed for the first 6 months of their babies' lives – a practice recommended by the World Health Organization and the American Dietetic Association for providing a host of health benefits to both mothers and their children.⁴ ⁵ Conversely, the research shows that paid maternity leave is “associated with increased breastfeeding, lower infant mortality, higher rates of immunization and health visits for babies, and lower risk of postpartum depression.”

While the benefits of paid maternity leave seem to be many, business owners have argued that a federal leave mandate would be too burdensome and costly – especially during tough economic times. Furthermore, some opponents of a paid maternity leave system worry that this program might undermine women's participation in the labor market. For example, a study on the effects of maternity leave policies in Western Europe has shown that German women who take “...a year of parental leave cut...[their] five-year wage growth rate by one-third.”⁶ The

¹ Sharon Lerner, *The War on Moms*. Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2010, p. 100, 102, 98, 87 (cited below, respectively).

² Human Rights Watch, “US: Lack of Paid Leave Harms Workers, Children,” February 23, 2011. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/23/us-lack-paid-leave-harms-workers-children>.

³ Jennifer Ludden, “Working Moms' Challenges: Paid Leave, Child Care,” April 20, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/20/150967376/working-moms-challenges-paid-leave-child-care>.

⁴ WHO <http://www.who.int/topics/breastfeeding/en/>.

⁵ D.C. James, and R. Lessen, “Position of the American Dietetic Association: promoting and supporting breastfeeding.” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 2009 Nov, 109(11):1926-42.

⁶ Kimberly Morgan and Kathrin Zippel, “Paid to Care: The Origins and Effects of Care Leave Policies in Western Europe,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 10.1, 2003, p. 70, 49.

same study also reports that in countries such as Finland, where child care leaves are extended and compensated, employers perceive hiring women to be a risky and expensive move – given the cost associated with finding “replacements during their absence from work.” Hence, adopting a paid leave policy in the U.S. could contribute to women’s unequal role in the workforce – by worsening the existing gender wage-gap⁷ – while also reinforcing “the traditional division of care work in the home.”

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⁷ Jennifer Perry and David Gundersen, “American Women and the Gender Pay Gap: A Changing Demographic or the Same Old Song,” *Advancing Women in Leadership*. Vol 21, pp. 153-159, 2011.