

Prince William's Charming Choice to Take Leave

Judith Warner for Bloomberg



On the face of it, Prince William's decision to take two weeks of job-protected, paid statutory paternity leave is absurd.

The heir to the British throne can live without the approximately \$206 a week in taxpayer funds that men in the U.K. are entitled to receive if they take time off to welcome a baby.

But as a symbolic gesture, the prince's choice is, as the Brits would say, brilliant. For in William's subtle, necessarily apolitical, good-guy way, he has issued the boldest possible statement of support for true workplace equality between men and women. It's a message that was too quickly buried amid all the baby-naming hysteria this week. And it's one that we in the U.S. need to hear if we're ever going to get past the place where women have been mired for the past decade.

The U.S. is totally out of step with Europe -- and even with the free-market-friendly U.K. -- when it comes to family-leave policies.

It's the only industrialized nation that doesn't offer new mothers any job-protected, paid maternity leave; the only developed country that doesn't guarantee paid sick leave; the only advanced economy that doesn't guarantee its workers any paid vacation time; and one of the only industrialized nations with no regulations to support flexible options for caretakers. But the U.S. is just like the rest of the world in that whatever leave or flexibility options exist are primarily used by women and are perceived as tools to allow them to meet the unique demands of working motherhood.

Women's Work

Private-sector work-life policies in the U.S. aren't just overwhelmingly used by

women; they are also advocated for and administered by women, and primarily pitched to female job candidates as a woman-friendly selling point. All this is done with the best possible intentions, as well as an eye to good business practice.

After all, if 31 percent of “highly qualified” American professional women are now leaving their jobs for extended periods to be with their kids, and 66 percent are downgrading their formerly top-flight careers to low-status, low-influence, part-time or “flex time” work, as economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett has found, that means a lot of valuable human capital is being lost.

This “leaky pipeline” phenomenon -- much discussed this year with Facebook Inc. (FB) chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg’s mega-hit “Lean In” -- isn’t just bad news for women’s progress. It also amounts to a costly brain drain that even the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, a body not particularly known for its progressive attitudes, considers enough of a competitiveness issue that it started a Center for Women in Business to address the “missing big-talent pool” of women at the top of American corporations.

The seemingly obvious fixes for this problem -- more and better policies aimed at helping women balance work and family - - have proved successful in keeping women at work, in at least some capacity. But they’ve been extremely disappointing so far in helping them advance and truly rise as far as their ambitions and talents might take them.

In Europe, where generous leave and flexibility policies exist to varying extents in every nation, the same pattern -- of men steadily advancing while women “lean back” and stagnate -- holds up. The sense of frustration now in the European Union, where only 3 percent of chief executive officers and 15 percent of board members are female, is such that some women’s advocates, such as the French philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, argue that too much family-friendliness has proved to be the enemy of women’s progress.

Sweden’s Experience

In Sweden, for example, new parents are entitled to more than a year of paid leave, then have the right to work an 80 percent schedule for full-time pay until a child is 8 years old. In the wake of the passage of a 2002 “use it or lose it” law requiring new fathers to take two months of leave or see those weeks deducted from a couple’s total time off, almost all men now take the minimal paternity leave.

Over the long term, however, mothers take almost four times as much time off from work as dads do, and they overwhelmingly work in low-paid, often part-time, public-sector jobs.

As a result, British sociologist Catherine Hakim has argued, female representation in top corporate posts is strikingly low. In 2012, women held just 22 percent of senior management positions in Sweden. The Swedish government has convened a commission to examine the stalling out of women's progress.

Clearly, while leave and flexibility policies are good for children and for families' quality of life generally, they haven't been good for the cause of women's workplace equality. In fact, as they are currently conceived and carried out, Robin Ely, an organizational-behavior expert at Harvard Business School, has argued, they have often had the perverse effect of reinforcing the status quo. That's because, by focusing on women's difficulties with "balance" and "conflicts" over motherhood, they have conveniently avoided the larger issues -- which, in the U.S., Ely argues, chiefly turn around the pervasive macho culture of overwork that plagues men and women alike.

Ely came to this conclusion after she was invited to investigate why so many women were dropping out of the pre-partner track at a global consulting firm. Studying the company's alleged woman problem, Ely soon saw that it had an operations problem: Managers were overselling their teams' potential for work, and nervous employees were working extreme hours and producing a far greater volume of work than was needed.

Everyone -- male and female -- complained of exhaustion and frustration with their work conditions. The 25 percent turnover rate was the same for men and women.

Men's Silence

Yet the management refused Ely's analysis, insisting that its personnel problems concerned only women struggling to accommodate the demands of motherhood and career. The result: The men suffered in silence or left. And "the women took formal work-family accommodations that derailed their careers," Ely says.

Focusing on women's struggles with work-family balance is a "social defense," Ely says: a way of fixating on a safe thought (women want to be with their children) and keeping at bay a much more threatening thought (the way we work now is pathological). It also precludes workplace changes that would most effectively enhance women's advancement -- notably, a rethinking of excessive hours and unrealistic productivity expectations that make living a balanced life impossible for everyone.

The British government appears to understand this. Denouncing the current system of one-year maternity leave and two-week paternity leave as "Edwardian" rules that "patronize women and marginalize men," it introduced a new system of

regulations last fall that intend, starting in 2015, to entitle mothers and fathers to fully share a year's worth of leave after the birth of a child, dividing the time in whatever way they see fit. The point of the new rules, Employment Relations and Consumer Minister Jo Swinson said, optimistically, was thoroughgoing "culture change."

Progress will be slow. Only 1,600 fathers took advantage of the last round of government reforms in fall 2011 that permitted men to take the last six months of their partner's maternity leave, and Swinson said the government only expected 8 percent of couples to take advantage of the new gender-neutral leave possibilities. Let's hope that William's gesture of leaning into fatherhood provides greater inspiration.

(Judith Warner, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, is the author of "Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety.")