

Why parental leave is more than a perk—it's a necessity

August 18 2016, by Andreas Vilhelmsson



Screenshot of the app interface offered by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency to handle parental leave (in Swedish).

I recently became a father to a beautiful little girl. As an ECR and first time parent living in Sweden, this means that I am now entitled to [parental benefits](#), i.e. money that I receive from the government to subsidize my expenses so I am able to be at home with my child instead of working, applying for a new job, or studying. Therefore, I did not have to make a choice between prioritizing my family and my professional development, but instead could let the two develop

simultaneously and benefit each other. In spite of strong evidence that supports the overwhelming benefits paid parental leave affords families, these policies are not universal. I hope that by sharing my positive experience with parental leave (which, granted is a special case), it can help other ECRs factor this in to the considerations they make when building a career.

My experience with parental leave in Sweden

As Swedish citizens, my fiancée and I are eligible for a combined 480 days of [paid parental leave](#). We can divide the days between us by transferring the days to each other, but 90 days are fixed for each of us and cannot be transferred in an effort to involve both parents in the early days of their child's life. For 390 days, we are entitled to nearly 80% of our regular salary, up to a maximum of SEK 946 (approximately \$112) per day. This leave can be taken by the month, week, day or even by the hour, since Sweden's parental leave policies also allows parents to take part-time leave with partial benefits for a longer period. As the non-pregnant parent, I was also entitled to compensation for 10 days of leave in connection with the birth of my daughter, so-called temporary parental benefits. These days allowed me to stay at home with my new family, and because I was financially compensated for this time through our public social security authority, my family did not suffer any financial hardship as a result.

The parental leave is extended further by my place of employment, which offers even more expansive benefits to encourage parenthood. My institution has [policies](#) that allow me to take full parental leave until my daughter is 18 months old and my working hours can be reduced by up to a quarter until my daughter is 12 years old. The University also offers a so-called "parental benefit supplement" which is paid out for a certain period of time, meaning that I am entitled to keep a larger portion of my salary per month than the 80% that I am entitled to by Swedish law. It is

therefore important to check institutional policies when reviewing job offers, regardless of whether one has children or plans to.

Paternal leave encourages fathers to take on the caregiver role

Promoting gender equality in child rearing and domestic life is unsurprising in Sweden, where more than 70% of women also participate in the professional workforce. It follows that [expansive parental leave policies allow for a revision of traditional gender roles](#) toward shared responsibilities between who is the breadwinner and who is the caregiver. [The importance of equal involvement from both parents](#) in raising a child has become a frequently discussed topic in modern life. The evidence shows that paid maternal leave [benefits women, families and the economy](#). By enacting similar policies for dads, they can be more [involved in family life](#), which confers [long-term benefits for their children](#). In terms of achieving more equitable division of labor between parents, regardless of gender, helping dads gain comfort and confidence in the role of caregiver is beneficial for the whole family. Other studies show that fathers who get involved in taking care of their children early on wind up being more involved in the child's life as they age. For households that value partnership, both professionally and in family life, it is critical that both parents are equipped to fulfill the role of primary caretaker for their children.

Beyond Sweden's borders: Parental leave flimsy elsewhere

Unfortunately, the right to long-term, paid parental leave is not the global norm for most parents in the world. I was surprised to learn that [the United States remains the only OECD country](#) whose federal government does not provide nor protect the right to paid maternity

leave, and is one of nine OECD countries that does not offer a paid leave entitlement reserved for fathers.

Fortunately, some states in the U.S. picked up the slack of the federal government. [California](#) is one of only a few states today that offers paid parental leave, and in April 2016, [San Francisco](#) became the first city in the U.S. to approve six weeks of fully paid leave for new parents who either bear or adopt a child. But social norms have not caught up with state policies on paternal leave. A common problem in these progressive states is that despite maternity leave being offered to mothers, many women fail to take leave, research indicates reasons for this may include: inadequate knowledge of policies, unclear values, social pressure, inexperience with negotiating in the workplace, and lack of financial and childcare resources. To encourage uptake of maternity leave policies, [researchers from the UC Berkeley School of Public Health](#) developed an evidence-based tool using participatory design to educate working women in California about maternity leave. This study assessed the short-term efficacy of the tool and encourage pregnant, working women in California to plan for and use maternity leave. Using a randomized control trial set-up, the findings from the pilot evaluation show that the tool helped educate women in the sample about maternity leave and effectively mobilized them to use their leave.

Compared to the struggles faced by the California women enrolled in the aforementioned study, access to information and planning resources about maternal and paternal leave in Sweden is easy to come by, particularly since the Swedish Social Insurance Agency has embraced technology. With the "Kassakollen" function, I can quickly see approximately how much I can receive for my parental leave. This tool is also available as free app for smartphones and tablets, which makes the information very accessible.

Family leave policies in Scandinavia enter US politics

During the US Democratic Primary elections, the [Scandinavian welfare societies](#) and their social contract has been intensively discussed as a model for the American dream, especially by former Democratic party candidate, [Senator Bernie Sanders](#). Sanders' former rival and the Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton also promises to enact policies [guaranteeing up to 12 weeks of paid family leave](#) to care for a new child in her political platform. Not only did Clinton break the glass ceiling of politics by [becoming the first woman](#) to be nominated for U.S. president by a major political party, but she also directed the dialog around paid parental leave and other women's right issues.

Concluding thoughts

As a first time parent and ECR in Sweden, I realize that I am truly blessed to live in a country and work for an institution that values my role as a parent and wants to give me the time to build a close relationship with my [child](#). Without paternity leave, dads face a major hurdle in being equal partners at home and without [maternity leave](#), or limited access to it, [women may be end having to make a choice between their academic career and having children](#), which should not be the case. Access to [parental leave](#) should be included as a government or workplace benefit to support ones' [professional development](#) and family planning goals. While hopefully the new U.S. president will usher in more expansive and generous family leave policies (12 weeks is as good as it gets from the U.S. government), ECRs are wise to consider the paternal leave policies provided by their employers/governments, regardless of where they are at in their family planning lives.

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