A Letter to My State Representative

In our ever-growing society, a topic that is most crucial to discuss is paid parental leave. As I'm sure you know, the United States of America does not offer this benefit. However, in 1993 the government did enact the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which, among other things, allows parents protected employment leave of up to 12 weeks to care for their child after birth or during extreme illness (Vahration and Johnson 177). This statute guarantees protection of your position at work but does not aide in the financial travesties that can happen if an employee were to take that time off without pay. In addition, this law is not all inclusive; you must have worked at least 1 year for the employer, labored at least 1,250 hours in the last 12 months, and the company must be sizable (at least 50 employees within a 75-mile radius) (177). The U.S. Department of Labor reports that "of the 35 million employees who used the leave from 1993 to 2000, only 26 percent indicated that they took time off to care for a new child or for maternity disability reasons" (177). State position here. What do you want them to do?

The World Health Organization recommends a "minimum 16 weeks of leave after childbirth to ensure optimal growth of the infant, proper bonding between mother and child, and the health of both mother and infant" (Vahratian and Johnson 177)[2]. Many Americans do not have the funds to live without pay for that amount of time. Out of 168 countries surveyed, 164 of them pay their employees during maternity leave (Heymann). The United States of America is the only developed country in the world to not guarantee paid maternity leave (Heymann). Remarkably common yet extremely varying, all of the countries have their own policy when it

comes to this legislation. For example, Spain and France offer their citizens over 300 weeks of time off with 9 percent of their income funded (Vahratian and Johnson 177). In contrast, Greece and Japan offer 45 to 50 percent of their wages during their almost 60 weeks of compensated time off (177). Likewise, in Germany mothers receive benefits equal to their income for up to 14 weeks (177).

How are some of these countries able to support such lavish benefits? Most countries use social-security programs or insurance groups to help lighten the load of the burden to employers (Wojcicki). For instance, our neighboring country, Canada, uses private insurance companies to facilitate the benefit to their workers. The mandated time off is covered under the Employment Insurance Act (Calder 101). This law permits a woman, who has given birth, the allowance of 17 weeks protected maternity leave, 15 of them are eligible for benefits (102). Canada's parental leave (which can be in addition to maternity leave), is also 17 weeks (102). Which adds up to 35 weeks of secured time off which is rewarded at 55 percent of their income (102).

Extensive research has been done on the positive effects of maternity leave. "A quarter of all women in the U.S. return to work fewer than 10 days after giving birth, leaving less time to bond with their children, making breast-feeding more difficult and increasing the risk of postpartum depression" (Wojcicki)". According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, when breast feeding is below average it can cause an increase of illnesses in infants (Wojcicki). Furthermore, when the maternity leave is not funded it can force the mother back to work too soon, causing adverse effects to her and her child's health (Wojcicki).

In my view, I believe Pennsylvania should join the few states who have enacted their own laws of paid parental leave in absence of a federal law. After researching, I've concluded that employees wishing to have pay during a future event of leave should have the option to pay an insurance company (that would specialize in income insurance) directly so they would have coverage of their salary during that time. Under those circumstances, women who are not in child-bearing years, people who can't have children or those who do not want children will not be contributing to something they don't intend on using. I will now further elaborate my reasons as to why this is my perspective.

Women are a particularly vital aspect of today's workforce. In 2010, the United States Department of Labor reported "of the 123 million women age 16 and over in the U.S., 72 million, or 58.6 percent, were labor force participants—working or looking for work. (United States Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics)" Equally important, women hold the purchasing power of over $2 trillion in the United States (Wojcicki). Their compassionate, driven and diverse nature are important when it comes to teamwork. When the mother is expecting no funding while on maternity leave, they tend to "…drop out of the workforce, leading to considerable loss of income during a woman's most productive years (Wojcicki)". I underline women in this argument because they are the people most affected by this short coming. Generally implied, American women provide more care for the home, children, and their aging parents; yet have fewer benefits available to them (Heymann). Females take part in the illustrious responsibility of continuing the reproduction of society; which is inevitable for the success of the state. In my own experience, I've had the relief of working for a company that provide generous paid time off. So when I had my first child I took maternity leave with six of those weeks still

receiving a paycheck due to the time I had saved up. It was apparent to me that if I had no pay during that time I would have went back to work in about ~~7~~seven days. The opportunity to stay home and have focused undivided attention to learn all about my child was insightful into the realm of parenthood which was so very new to me. Unfortunately, six weeks was too soon for me to return to work; I had to ask for time off donations from my fellow coworkers. Even though I should have been grateful for the time I had (that most people in America don't get), I knew it wasn't enough. I wasn't confident enough as a parent and as a mother to leave her yet. I have heard other accounts of women who stayed out of work for a mere week after having a child, this is so distressing to hear. The argument for compensated time off is not simply for the event of a new baby, but also in the event of a sick child. In 37 countries around the world, when a child gets notably sick, it is guaranteed that they have some paid time off to care for the child (Heymann). In the hope that the child may recuperate faster and leave the hospital earlier, saving public resources (Heymann).

Sometimes seen in other countries, businesses have had to help carry the cost of this implementation of paid leaves. In the United States, a few states and businesses have made their own policies/laws of paying parents to stay home with their new baby. California, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Puerto Rico have all enacted legislation to provide compensated family and medical leave through temporary disability programs (Vahratian and Johnson 178). Some businesses may be fearful of too many employees taking advantage of this benefit, which could cause budget conflicts. In California, it is reported that even though there is a benefit of funded time off both a few weeks before birth and up to 8 weeks postnatal, only 32 percent took leave before their due date (178). It is stated that people are hesitant to take this

time off because it may hold them back in a promotional setting and they may be viewed as a temporary employee; ultimately delaying the progress women have made in forming gender equality (178). The Center for Economic and Policy Research surveyed employers after California initiated paid medical leave and found that "…91 percent of employers said the policy either boosted profits or had no effect. They also noted improved productivity, higher morale, and reduced turnover." (Wojcicki)". Comparatively, some companies have taken on their own policy to show appreciation to families in addition to attracting and retaining skillful employees. Google currently extends 18 weeks of funded maternity leave to their employees (Wojcicki). In 2007, when they altered their policy from 12 weeks to 18 weeks, the rate at which new moms left fell by 50 percent (Wojcicki).

With Pennsylvania being a generally conservative state, many people want to come here to start families. Correspondingly, Pennsylvania is home to 257 degree-granting colleges which is the third highest state in the nation, according to the Digest of Education Statistics (United States Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics). In the 2014 Fall semester, Pennsylvania had around 36,000 out-of-state under graduate students come to this state for degrees, this includes foreign students as well (United States Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics). If people are out-of-state attending college here, they may want to stay and raise a family since we would be one of only seven states in the country to offer such an incentive. This would do wonders for our economic growth by obtaining additional educated people.

Some conflicts have risen while implementing these laws of compensated parental leave. Canada's first income insurance statute was enacted in the wake of the Great Depression in 1940 (Calder 103). It was in fact discriminatory in many ways including "…different benefit rates for persons with and without dependents; excludes occupations including teaching and nursing; strict eligibility requirements for those in lower-paying work or contingent work and provisions that did not grant benefits to those who voluntarily left work, regardless of reason (103)". Amendments were made and by the end of the 1960s, the program was again scrutinized for excluding women, including maternity benefits (104). In 1971, maternity leave specifications were included in the program (104). Women's organizations quickly noticed the troubling concerns that were arranged within the legislation (104). To be eligible for the benefits of the program, "…women needed to have major attachment to the workforce, they had to show they were employed at the time of conception, timing of the leave was based on what was seen as best for the fetus or for an infant, not for the woman herself and finally if for any of these reasons women were not eligible for maternity leave, and were absent from their work due to pregnancy, they would not be eligible for regular benefits either (105)". Many revisions have been made but in all defense a lot has changed in society as far as women's rights are concerned since the 1940s.

All things considered, I believe Pennsylvania should join the few states in this country who have enacted their own laws of paid parental leave in absence of a federal law. I leave it up to you to see this through. I don't expect animosity towards this law from the public, primarily because family life is important to the majority of Americans, not to mention Pennsylvanians. It's obvious that "this neglect is often a reflection of the fact that women's domestic obligation is

taken for granted in the formulation of social policies and that social reproduction has been left outside of political analyses of the economy, and ignored as a site of struggle" (Calder 114). Businesses may be worried about the extra expense it could put on them. Nevertheless, men and women having and raising children should not be viewed only as a consequential personal choice made by an employee to have kids but to see the bigger picture, as it is a collective effort to further the generational reproduction of society (114). Which is entirely different than simply being absent from work, and it should be respected as such. Thank you for your time in regards to this matter.

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