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BASIC INSTINCTS; Paid Leave For Maternity Is the Norm, Except In ...

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

AMERICAN women sometimes joke that they plan to move to Sweden or France before they become pregnant, to take advantage of the generous paid maternity leave those countries provide.

In fact, would-be moms may not realize they have many more options than just those two: 170 countries offer some paid maternity leave, and 98 of them offer at least 14 weeks off with pay.

The United States is not one of them.

This point was starkly illustrated in a world map published in the August issue of National Geographic entitled "Who Gives Parents a Break?" The data was provided by the "The Work, Family and Equity Index," a report released in 2007 by researchers at Harvard and McGill.

On the map, the United States stood out as an arid brown blotch, one of only four -- the others being Liberia, Papua New Guinea and Swaziland -- with no paid family leave.

Why doesn't such a policy exist now, on a national level? There is no simple answer.

First, the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act does require certain larger companies to give workers who meet certain criteria up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave. But as many as 40 percent of workers don't qualify under the provisions of that law -- because their employer is too small, or they haven't worked for the company long enough. And a survey in 2000 by the Department of Labor found that 78 percent of workers who qualified for this leave said they didn't take it because they couldn't afford to.

Employees may want greater government involvement, but many businesses object to the idea of being required to give paid leave. The main issue is financial, said Marc Freedman, director of labor law policy at the United States Chamber of Commerce, which opposes government requirements for paid family leave. "Paid leave is widely provided by many businesses already," he said.

"Employers are at least resistant if not opposed because of their fears of the cost impact of this mandate. They would have to find the money to pay for these benefits."

While companies may balk at the cost of paid leave, many workers often do need time off for reasons having to do with health or family responsibility -- and they can ill afford to lose any wages, let alone their jobs.

As the lawyer Joan Williams notes in her book "Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It" (Oxford University Press, 2001), many people, and not just employers, are still influenced by the outdated ideal of the single-income household, in which a working person typically relied on someone at home to care for a new baby or a sick relative or cope with any of the myriad situations that families face.

MOST families today are dependent on two incomes. But Debra Ness, president of the National Partnership for Women and Families, an advocacy organization in Washington, said, "Our policies don't reflect the reality of working families' lives."

There have been changes at the state level. California has had a paid family leave law since 2004, and Washington State approved a parental leave law in April. Similar bills have been proposed in other states. Most of these measures are paid for entirely by employees.

In California, workers contribute a small percentage of each paycheck into a collective benefits fund; those who need a leave can take six weeks off at 55 percent of their wages.

At the federal level, Senator Christopher J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, and Senator Ted Stevens, Republican of Alaska, introduced a bill in June, that would in effect become a financial supplement to the federal Family and Medical Leave Act. Unlike the California program, funding for the Family Leave Insurance Act of 2007 would come from a combination of employer and employee contributions, and general tax revenues as well.

Clearly, there are a lot of details to work out. But given all of these proposals, and the 170 countries with paid leave now, surely there is some solution for the United States. There are plenty of good reasons to go to Sweden or France, but paid parental leave shouldn't be one of them.

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