
Women at Work: When Corporate Support Backfires



By Nicholas Bray, European Correspondent with Herminia Ibarra, Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Family-friendly corporate policies help women to stay in the workforce. But perversely they may also be keeping women from advancing into the executive suite

As CEO of Yahoo!, Marissa Meyer took flak from work/life-balance campaigners when she went back to her office last October only two weeks after having a baby. As a successful corporate executive who had achieved near-iconic status for many working women, it seemed to many that she owed it to her gender to take a longer stretch of maternity leave.

She earned still more opprobrium in February with an edict banning Yahoo! employees from working at home. That move – ostensibly to increase productivity – was widely viewed as slap in the face for advocates of flexible working practices to facilitate parenthood.

But she picked up points months later by doubling to 16 weeks the amount of paid leave that women staffers at Yahoo! can take after having a baby.

And she raised even louder cheers from feminist campaigners by simultaneously offering male employees eight weeks of paternity leave.

Pushing women to the top

At a commercial level, those decisions brought Yahoo! closer to other California-based tech giants such as Google and Facebook that offer even more generous parenting benefits to their employees.

But they also sparked off a debate about the role of support for working parents in promoting women's advancement. Paradoxically, some analysts have concluded – and the example of Yahoo!'s Meyer supports this idea – the widespread lack of support for mothers in the workplace that typifies the U.S. may actually push more women to the top in the corporate environment.

That poses a new conundrum for work/life balance campaigners and for those fighting to get more women into senior positions in companies.

Unexpected flaws, which can cripple female corporate advancement, are now becoming apparent in policies for parental leave and more flexible working practices, says [Herminia Ibarra](#), Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning and Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

In an “unintended consequence” of such policies, she told INSEAD Knowledge in an interview, “women tend to predominate in roles, in jobs, in organisations, in industry sectors that have more flexibility to them, fewer hours in terms of their job requirements, fewer travel requirements and that often are paid less and have less power and status associated with them.”

Pink ghettos

While such jobs do make it easier for women to solidify their place in the work force, these jobs “very rarely lead to the most senior levels of management,”

Ibarra points out. “When you have these practices in place, women end up much more in what we call the ‘pink ghettos’” -- typically staff roles and support functions such as human resource management and communications that have “more flexibility because you are not on the front line, you are not traveling all the time, you are not answering to a client.”

That’s not to say that the United States, with its poor record of family-friendly workplace legislation, should be taken as a model.

Notoriously, the U.S. is alone among Western industrial countries – and virtually alone worldwide – in not providing working mothers with at least a few weeks of mandated paid maternity leave.

While other countries encourage new mothers, and increasingly fathers as well, to take time off to nurture their baby, the only federal requirement in the U.S. – and this only since 1993 -- is for firms with more than 50 employees in a defined geographical area to let new mothers take 12 weeks off without pay.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in light of its lack of family-friendly policies, the U.S. stood 17th among 22 OECD countries in 2010 in terms of women’s participation in the labour force, with only 75.2% of women aged 25-54 working compared with 79.5% on average for the others, according to OECD figures. Two decades earlier, the U.S. had ranked in sixth place, with a participation rate of 74%, while the average for the others had been 67%.

Success at the margins

But nothing is black and white. While the U.S. does less well than many other countries in terms of women’s overall participation in the labour force, it may be more effective in pushing forward those women who do stay in their jobs.

While family-friendly policies have helped to raise women's participation in the labour force in other countries, they often have resulted in more part-time rather than full-time working and in more jobs in low-ranking positions, according to a [study](#) by two Cornell University economists, Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn.

“In addition to having a much higher incidence of full-time work than women in other countries, women in the United States also tend to work in higher level positions than those in most other countries,” Blau and Kahn observed.

By some measures, the U.S. can indeed show success stories of women in senior management. Some 4.2% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women, compared with 2%

among FTSE 100 companies in the U.K., 1% among Germany's top 100 companies and zero women at the top of France's CAC 40 firms.

But such successes are at the margins, and the statistics are far from conclusive. At a broader level, only 20% of senior executives in U.S. companies are women, according to a recent survey by Grant Thornton, compared with 26% in France, 31% in Germany and a startling 51% in China. (The U.K. lags behind the U.S. at 19%.)

Focus on fathers

So where should campaigners be looking for effective policies to promote top-level female involvement in business?

In the U.S., some states already impose more generous conditions for maternity leave than those mandated at federal level. But it is essentially up to employers to decide on how they treat their employees. The figures are not encouraging. According to a recent study by the Families and Work Institute, 42% of firms with more than 50 employees gave no financial support for employees on maternity leave in 2012. Only 5% of firms surveyed offered time off with full pay for new mothers, down from 6% in 2005.

Alongside mothers, however, attention is now focusing on the role of fathers, says Ibarra.

Faced with the evidence that some policies in favour of women are resulting in "dysfunctional consequences" by consigning women to lower-level jobs where they are "not being forced into the front line", she argues, "we should reconsider over-incentivising women to stay in the workforce and instead consider incentives for working dads."

Shared entitlement

Some countries, such as Sweden, already do this by offering bonuses to parents who share a joint paid parental leave entitlement. Others, such as Germany, offer voluntary paid paternity leave but encourage fathers to take it by giving more leave to mothers if they do.

Paternity leave isn't just good for fathers and for children. It can also help women in their careers. A [study](#) of the impact of mandated paternity leave entitlements in Quebec by Cornell University researcher Ankita Patnaik found that one of the consequences was an increase in the likelihood of women

returning to their previous employer after giving birth.

In the U.S., companies like Facebook, Google and Yahoo! are helping to blaze a trail by signalling a commitment to fathers as well as to mothers in their parental leave policies. And fathers are taking advantage of the opportunity, as signalled by the recent [Facebook posting](#) of one of the company's own managers, Tom Stocky.

At the end of a four-month absence from work on paternity leave, he concluded that the experience was “good for gender equality in the workplace and ... good for families with fathers.”

That's a testimonial crafted in heaven for gender equality campaigners like Ibarra. To take things forward, she observes, what is needed is a combination of appropriate official and corporate policies, on the one hand, and exemplary role models, on the other.

“What you need to do is not just encourage (family-friendly flexibility), but make it visible, publicise it, show the role models, because a lot of times people are doing it but behind the scenes, under the radar screen, and so therefore people don't realise that it's possible and that they can do a high-powered job and also have the flexibility that they need.”

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