

Not Just a Women's Issue: The Economic Case for Providing Universal Child Care in the United States



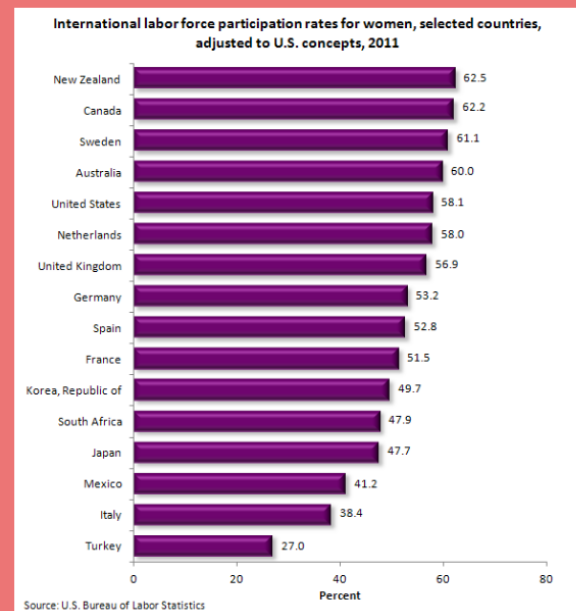
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The Problem: Low Female Workforce Participation

57% work outside the home (Status of Women in the States).
OF WOMEN

But the labor force participation rate for women in their "prime working years" decreased by **3%** between 2000 and 2014 (Status of Women in the States).

How the United States Stacks Up



The U.S.

Bureau of Labor Statistics

How Did We Get Here?

The United States is widely considered to be the only developed nation on Earth which does not provide guaranteed paid maternity leave for working mothers (Social Policy Division). While paid maternity leave is not a requirement of a nation with optimal gender equality, the lack of this policy in the United States serves as a greater indication of the widespread gender inequality in the workforce.

The incentives to improve the rates of female participation in the workforce lie, altruistically, in the notion of gender equality and, realistically, in the notion of economic growth. In order to increase female workforce participation, high-cost social programs (like universal child care) need to be implemented by the federal government. While the initial cost may be daunting to some, the Journal of Economic Perspectives explains that these policies would have a net positive economic impact when implemented in a country like the United States (Olivetti, C. and Petrongolo, B.). The issue of gender equality within the workforce goes beyond the office and into the scope of gender equality in the United States as a whole. Women will not be considered equal to men unless they are able to participate in opportunities, such as the workforce, to the same extent. It is essential to tackle gender inequality in a variety of different sectors and scopes for optimal opportunities for success.

The Solution: Universal Child Care

The American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings indicates that female participation in the American workforce would increase by 7% if it increased its family support policies to match those of most of the rest of the world (Blau, F. and Kahn, L.). This information clearly indicates the room which exists for advancement in this sector. The most promising solution for increasing female participation in the workforce is the introduction of universal child care policies in the United States.

Addressing Myths and Concerns

- 1** Myth: Universal child care would force all women to join the workforce
The Pew Research Center indicates that 32% of mothers with children under the age of 18 would like to spend at least some time at home with them instead of working full time (Wang, W.). These women would be able to spend time with their children with or without the introduction of universal child care. On the inverse, however, mothers who feel they are forced to stay home to raise their children because of the high financial cost of childcare in the United States would be somewhat eased of the financial burden.
- 2** Myth: Taking time away from the workforce does not have a negative impact on one's future career
Women with an MBA, for example, earn less than men with the same level of experience and education at the end of their careers (despite similar starting salaries), most likely due to the loss of experience in the workforce which occurs when women begin to start families (Bertrand, M., Goldin, C., and Katz, L.).
- 3** The big concern: cost
The predicted \$140 billion annual cost of implementing universal child care in the United States pales in comparison to the individual cost of child care for working families. In New York, for example, the cost of year-round childcare is equivalent to or, in some cases, greater than the cost of in-state college tuition (The Cost of Childcare).

\$140B
ANNUALLY
in implementation costs
(Samuels, C.)

The Politics of This Public Policy



Given the reality that female participation in the American workforce has become commonplace only in the most recent generations, the speed with which this issue has ascended the ranks of public discussion is remarkable. In an already crowded 2020 field, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) has put her fight for women and children at the forefront of her presidential platform. Her campaign website does not yet address the creation of a universal child care program, likely because of the high aforementioned cost. The Senator does, however, advocate for the creation of a national paid family leave program. Gillibrand explains the timeliness of such an issue because "America is the only industrialized nation in the world without any form of a paid family leave plan" (Gillibrand, K.).

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