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# Lean In, Dad

By CATHERINE RAMPELL

I happen to be an educated young woman who loves her job, sometimes gushingly, occasionally annoyingly. And yet, even in this enlightened age, I've had two relationships end — at least in large part — thanks to that clammy-palmed discussion in which couples plot hypothetical milestones and life goals. The gentlemen in question said that, somewhere in our semicharted future, they expected me to quit my job. At least for a couple of years, anyway, in order to be the kind of hypothetical mother they wanted to raise their hypothetical kids, if that hypothetical day ever came.

I don't pretend to know how common this situation is, and how many other young women have found themselves in it. But it clarified not only the choices that future mothers must make about their careers, but also how early in their careers they must begin to think about them. And while fairness and feminism may urge us to find better ways for women to balance work and life — Sheryl Sandberg and Anne-Marie Slaughter have certainly made impassioned cries — the most convincing argument seems to be an economic one.

In the United States, women represent not only a majority of college graduates but also a majority of advanced-degree holders. But the lack of policies facilitating the work-life balance — like paid maternity leave and flexible work hours — has millions of them underemployed. It's hard to quantify exactly how much human capital is being wasted, but one clue lies in a study by economists at the University of Chicago and Stanford. It estimates that 15 to 20 percent of American productivity growth over the last five decades has come from more efficient allocation of underrepresented groups, like women, into occupations that were largely off-limits, like doctors or lawyers. Even more efficient allocation of women's talents would, presumably, drive further growth, which will become even more critical in the years ahead. By 2050, there are projected to be just 2.6 working-age Americans for every American of retirement age. (In 2008, it was 4.7.)

Other rich countries have figured out ways to keep women in the labor force. While companies like Yahoo and Best Buy bar employees from working from home, the European Union has issued a directive that all member countries must allow parents — men and women — to request part-time, flexible or home-based work arrangements in addition to full-time work. More developed countries also have affordable, high-quality public childcare. In Sweden, nurseries are even available 24 hours a day.

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Such policies contribute to these countries' swollen welfare states and higher tax burdens, but they do keep women at work. Back in 1990, in a ranking of 22 developed countries, the United States had the 6th-highest share of its prime-working-age women active in the work force. By 2010, it had tumbled to 17th place. A new study from Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn, both economists at Cornell, estimates that if the United States had the average of other developed countries' work-life policies, 82 percent of America's prime-working-age women would be in the labor force, instead of the current 75 percent.

But what kind of employment would they have, exactly? New research suggests that, because it's primarily women who take advantage of leave and part-time entitlements, work-life accommodations often paradoxically limit career trajectories. Women in Sweden, Finland and Denmark — and other countries held up as paragons of gender parity — are much more likely to end up in traditional pink-collar positions than are their counterparts in the United States. They are certainly much less likely to end up as managers, or in traditionally male professional arenas like law or finance. "In a regime where anyone can go part time, where it's hard to get rid of people if they do, employers might sort on the front end and not hire people they think are likely to want to go part time, which usually means women," said Lawrence F. Katz, an economist at Harvard. "There may be no way a woman can credibly commit to sticking around and not going part time." The U.S., where these policies do not exist, has the smallest gap between women's representation in the labor force and their representation in senior management positions.

In order to prescribe policies that really allow female workers to "lean in" at work, social scientists are trying to find ones that recast social norms and encourage male workers to "lean in" at home. One area where there seems to be a lot of potential is paternity leave, which still has a stigma in both the United States and Europe. To remedy this bad rap, countries like Sweden and Norway have recently introduced a quota of paid parental leave available *only* to fathers. If dads don't take it, they're leaving money on the table. In Germany and Portugal, moms get bonus weeks of maternity leave if their husbands take a minimum amount of paternity leave. All these countries have seen gigantic increases in the share of fathers who go on leave.

This might not sound like such a big deal, but social scientists are coming around to the notion that a man spending a few weeks at home with his newborn can help recast expectations and gender roles, at work and home, for a long time. A striking new study by a Cornell graduate student, Ankita Patnaik, based on a new paid paternity-leave quota in Quebec, found that parents' time use changed significantly. Several years after being exposed to the reform, fathers spent more time in child care and domestic work — particularly "time-inflexible" chores, like cooking, that cut into working hours — than fathers who weren't exposed to the

reform. More important, mothers spent considerably more time at work growing their careers and contributing more to the economy, all without any public mandates or shaming.

Paid paternity leave, like paid maternity leave, may sound like a pipe dream, but states (New Jersey, California) and big companies (Ernst & Young, Bank of America) are increasingly offering it and financing it out of their own pocket. They have a vested interest in lobbying Congress to federalize the costs of these accommodations. And that seems only fair. After all, unleashing the full potential of the second sex benefits not only this handful of players but the entire U.S. economy, too.

*Catherine Rampell is an economics reporter for The Times. Adam Davidson is off this week.*