

Here's What Working Parents Should Envy About Norway (and It's Not Just The Electric Cars)



Jennifer Barrett Contributor

Personal Finance

I'm an award-winning financial journalist, best-selling author and head of education at Acorns.

Norway's gotten a lot of attention since it became the target of actor Will Ferrell's envy and ire in [GM's Super Bowl ads](#) for beating the U.S. to become the world's biggest per-capita market for electric vehicles. The viral ads have spurred several creative responses from Norway that acknowledge not just its high number of electric vehicles sales but also its [free college tuition and one-year paid maternity leave](#).

There's plenty to be envious about there—if you're one of the [45 million Americans](#) carrying some of the country's record [\\$1.7 trillion](#) in [student loan debt](#), say, or one of the millions of women who take an average of just [10 weeks of maternity leave](#) in the U.S. each year, much of it unpaid.

As a working mom of two, I sighed when the very pregnant young Nordic woman in one video skied off to enjoy her full (and fully paid) year of maternity leave. But that's not all that makes Norway a true trailblazer—or that we might benefit from emulating.

Norway was also the first country in the world to reserve paid leave specifically for fathers.

Norway's policies are generous: Dads get 15 weeks of non-transferable, use-it-or-lose-it paid leave. And, overall, new parents can take [49 weeks at 100](#)

[percent](#) of earnings or 59 weeks at 80 percent of earnings. Whereas, on average across developed countries, mothers are entitled to about [18 weeks of paid maternity leave](#) —and fathers have access to about eight weeks of paid leave overall. (And, of course, in America, there is no federally mandated paid parental leave at all for the private sector.)

Lawmakers and business leaders in the Nordic countries not only worked together to create targeted paternity leave policies but a public awareness campaign, too, to ensure dads would actually take the paid leave. They promoted images of celebrity dads with babies strapped to them, tattooed men pushing strollers and fathers together in a bar with infants in tow. And it worked.

A whopping [90 percent of Norwegian fathers](#) now take advantage of the paid paternity leave. Ninety percent!

MORE FOR YOU

How Your Business Best Stands To Benefit From Embracing Automation

21 Podcasts To Listen To In 2021

Tapping Into Health To Excel In Business

Contrast that with the U.S., where 76 percent of fathers go back to work within *a week* after the birth or adoption of a child. And one in four women are back within 10 days of giving birth, [according to Rob Wilson](#), president of Employco USA, a national employment solutions firm.

And this disparity has deeper implications than we may realize.



In Norway, both parents get generous fully paid parental leave. KELLY SIKKEMA FOR UNSPLASH

We know that American moms are dropping out of the workforce in numbers that far outpace men in part because work and motherhood often feel incompatible in the U.S. This has been particularly acute during the pandemic, which has erased traditional childcare options and forced many parents (though mainly moms) to become part-time educators to their remotely schooled kids, too. Millions of women have [dropped out of the workforce](#) in recent months. (Earlier this week, President Joseph Biden called it a “[national emergency](#).”)

But any solution we consider needs to look past the pandemic at the root causes of these inequities, which existed long before the pandemic. And they often begin at childbirth.

Paternity leave has long taken a back seat to the debate over paid maternity leave in the U.S. (And the country has a dismal record there, too: a report on the [State of the World’s Mothers](#) notes that the U.S. has the “least generous maternity leave policy of any wealthy nation.”)

But at the heart of this lies a simple truth: While there has been a paradigm shift in the breadwinning model in recent years, as I explain [in my upcoming book](#), our country—and our corporate leaders—continue to cling to policies and beliefs that assume the father will be the breadwinner and the mother, the caregiver.

That despite the fact that a record number of working moms are [the main breadwinners](#) for families now. In nearly half of the more than 30 million families with children under 18 in the U.S., the mother is contributing at least 40 percent of the household earnings. (Among Black women, the percentage is [even higher](#).)

But while millions of women are picking up the primary breadwinning responsibilities, we are not seeing a commensurate increase in fathers picking up more of the caregiving responsibilities. And this means women often end up trying to shoulder both single-handedly—an almost impossible task even before the pandemic.

The fact is: Women's income is *critical* in the majority of U.S. households today. And it's time we started treating it that way. That starts with providing paid parental leave to both parents, and incentivizing them to take it.

As a [new report](#) from the think tank New America found, while the vast majority of men say they value and want to take on more of the caregiving responsibilities that women overwhelmingly shoulder, most don't actually do it unless they already have experience doing so. Providing paid leave for *each* parent can change that, as Norway has proven.

“Paternity leave has created a culture for Norwegian fathers to be more active parents than just secondary caregivers,” Christa Clapp, an American mother working in Norway, [noted in *The Washington Post*](#) “As social acceptance of paternal leave is growing, the job market is also viewing mothers and fathers more equally.”

In fact, Norway now has the one of the highest ratios of female-to-male earned income, nearly closing the gap on the so-called “[motherhood penalty](#).” (Norway’s current gender income gap is [13 percent](#) while the average gender pay gap in the European Union is 16 percent—and in the U.S., it’s [18 percent](#).) The ratio of women to men in the Norwegian job market is [nearly 0.95](#). And there’s also plenty of research [demonstrating the benefits](#) to children’s wellbeing and development of having more involved dads early on.

“In Norway today, it would be very hard to insist on just being the breadwinner and not caring about the children,” [Margunn Bjørnholt](#), a [sociologist and research professor](#) in Oslo told the learning platform Apolitical.

The paternity policy in Norway, and the cultural shift that has accompanied it, hasn’t just helped to close the gender wage gap and support women’s professional and financial advancement: It’s helped the country’s economy. A lot.

The former Ministry of Finance, Sigbjørn Johnsen, calculated that increased tax revenue from the retention of women in the labour force has contributed as much to Norway’s national wealth as the sovereign pension fund that was built off the oil resources discovered there in the late 1960s. And the Norwegian oil fund is the *largest sovereign wealth fund in the world*, [valued today at about \\$1.3 trillion](#). Norway’s GDP per capita is [now \\$89,741](#), one of the highest among the world’s developed countries.

“The Nordic countries have shown us what is possible,” says Amy Henderson, CEO and co-founder of [TendLab](#) and author of the upcoming book, “[Tending: Parenthood & The Future of Work](#),” which explores the impact of the Nordic policies.

Last week, Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) introduced the [Family and Medical Insurance Leave](#)

[\(FAMILY\) Act](#), which would create a new national paid family and medical leave program. “A critical tool for long term economic recovery”—in their words—it would allow all workers to take 12 weeks of paid leave to care for a new baby, or to manage a serious health condition or care for an ailing loved one. Workers would receive up to 66 percent of their monthly wages during their leave.

That’s a big step in the right direction. But it’s only the first. To truly support working families and women’s advancement, we should take a cue from Norway and provide fully paid maternity and paternity leave—and work to encourage all dads to take it. As Will Ferrell might tell you, that’d give us one less reason to envy the Norwegians, and a whole new meaning to “Daddy’s Home.”



Jennifer Barrett

I’m a personal finance expert and longtime financial journalist who’s written for publications like The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Worth, Money and...

[Read More](#)
