

Caring for Children – Another Opportunity for Gender Equality

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I have not really thought about the term-gender equality-very much. I operate in my daily life from a position of power. I am white, upper middle class, and have been raised to have the confidence that I can do anything I set my mind to do. I feel empowered in my job as a good employee, empowered in my role as wife and mother in my family, and empowered as a community volunteer. I personally feel very equal to men as I live my daily life.

As I did some research for this article, I was fascinated to be reminded that in the United States, although women and men have basically achieved gender equality in terms of education, women are still not earning as much as men in almost every job field. We still have a way to go to achieve gender equality for equal pay for equal work.

Another area of inequality is time spent raising and caring for children. While I think the mother will always have a special role in raising children, when fathers have the opportunity to be more active parents, closer bonds between children and fathers occur. My father stayed home for five years with me and my brother in the 1970s, and I have a very close relationship with both my father and mother.

One federal law that has helped more fathers take time away from work to care for their babies is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993. This is the federal law that stipulates that certain types of employers must grant an eligible employee up to a total of 12 workweeks of unpaid leave during any 12-month period for one or more of the following reasons: 1) the birth and care of the newborn child; 2) the adoption or foster care of a child; 3) care for an immediate family member with a serious health condition; or 4) medical leave because of a serious health condition.

The law applies to all public agencies including state, local and federal employers; local education agencies (schools); and private-sector employers who employed 50 or more employees in 20 or more workweeks in the current or preceding calendar year. So while it certainly does not cover everyone, it does mean a larger number of men are able to take time off from work to care for a new baby.

I have seen more and more colleagues at my job with the City of Seattle, both men

and women, use the FMLA to take time off to care for a new baby. I have also seen more and more smaller businesses and larger companies offering paid paternity leave for fathers, in addition to paid maternity leave for mothers. While I took four months off from work with the birth of each child, my husband Dan was able to take at least one month of paid paternity leave for each child, which enabled him to share in the early days of caring for our babies. It meant that we were able to be more “equal” in learning how to care for our new baby together.

For me, gender equality is about both men and women having the same opportunities and the same ability to take advantage of those opportunities, whether with education, a job, or child rearing.

I think it is exciting that in the United States we are seeing a trend that more fathers are taking a more active role in parenting, starting with the care of newborns. Government policies, such as the FMLA on a federal level, as well as more and more private businesses offering paid paternity leave, are helping facilitate this trend.