International Labour Organization study: US provides least maternity support in industrialized world, Australia and New Zealand among worst providers

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A new study conducted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that the United States, Australia and New Zealand are the only industrialized nations that do not provide paid maternity leave and health benefits by law. Joining them in that category are some of the poorest countries in the world, including Lesotho, Swaziland and Papua New Guinea.

In the US the only law mandating maternity leave is the Family and Medical Leave Act, passed in 1993, which permits women to take twelve weeks of unpaid leave. That measure, enacted with great fanfare, barely brought the US up to the global standard established by the ILO, a UN agency, *in 1952*. The agency has long considered a 12-week leave to be the minimum permissible, and recommends at least 14 weeks.

In countries where cash benefits are provided through social security, the agency standard calls for governments to pay a woman at a rate of not less than two-thirds of her previous insured earnings, with full health benefits. More than eighty countries stipulate that a woman shall receive 100 percent of her wages for some length of time.

The Czech Republic provides 28 weeks of paid leave; Hungary, 24; Italy, five months; and Canada, 17 weeks. In Norway mothers receive 18 weeks leave at one hundred percent of their normal wages; an additional 26 paid weeks may be taken by either parent. Similar provisions apply in Sweden and Denmark.

While the US, Australia and New Zealand have the worst record on maternity benefits (the US is also among the minority of countries that provide no special breaks for nursing mothers at work), many governments have requirements on advance notice that are both humiliating and provide potential grounds for denying benefits. In Austria, for example, a woman must tell her employer of her pregnancy and the likely date of birth as soon as she herself knows. In Ireland and the United Kingdom, notification must follow a strict procedure or the woman could lose the protection of the courts in any dispute. Some countries allow employers to make rules so restrictive that women cannot qualify or receive only partial pay.

In eastern Europe, following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes and the restoration of capitalist market relations, previously extensive maternity benefits — in particular cash benefits — have been cut back. In many impoverished countries, where women work in the so-called informal sector, legislation has little meaning. In Colombia, an estimated 52 percent of working women are so employed, in Peru, 48 percent, and Poland, 10 percent.

In some African countries laws mandate maternity benefits, but the agencies that would administer the programs have ceased to exist. In Benin the law requires that women be given 14 weeks leave at 100 percent of previous earnings, paid by the social security system. That system, however, covers only an estimated 5 percent of the working population. In Cote d'Ivoire, the figure is 7 percent; in Cameroon, 10 percent.

F.J. Dy-Hammar, Chief of the ILO Conditions of Work Branch, who oversaw the study, commented, "In all parts of the world, working women who become pregnant are faced with the threat of job loss,

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suspended earnings and increased health risks due to inadequate safeguards for their employment."

The study found these conditions existing at a time when the percentage of women of child-bearing age in the work force continues to increase. "Women now provide the main source of income in some 30 per cent of all households worldwide," the report notes. In Europe 59 percent of working women supply half or more of their family's household income; in the US, 55 percent. The ILO estimates that in "just over 10 years, 80 per cent of all women in industrialized countries, and 70 per cent globally, will be working outside the home throughout their childbearing years."

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