



# PAID LEAVE AND THE PANDEMIC

Effective Workplace Policies and Practices  
For a Time of Crisis and Beyond

**JANUARY 2021**

*Prepared by PL+US and Promundo, in collaboration  
with the Parental Leave Corporate Task Force*

PL+US



## Acknowledgments

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## List of Abbreviations

- COVID-19:** Coronavirus Disease 2019
- ETO:** Emergency Time Off
- FFCRA:** Families First Coronavirus Response Act
- PLCTF:** Parental Leave Corporate Task Force
- PL+US:** Paid Leave for the US
- PTO:** Paid Time Off
- WHO:** World Health Organization
- US:** United States of America

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## Executive Summary

The 'Paid Leave and the Pandemic: Effective Workplace Policies and Practices For a Time of Crisis and Beyond' insights report, by Paid Leave for the US (PL+US) and Promundo, in collaboration with the Parental Leave Corporate Task Force (PLCTF) is a quantitative and qualitative survey of businesses to assess the impact of paid family and medical leave policies on companies during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. To thoroughly understand the role of paid leave and related workplace policies, PL+US and Promundo surveyed 40 companies globally, integrating inputs from executives and human resources teams and insights from in-depth interviews. The 40 companies represent more than half a million employees from industries including construction, communications, education, entertainment, finance, food services, hospitality, technology, retail, and more. Based on these learnings, the report makes recommendations for both business practice and public policy that should endure post-pandemic to achieve equality in uptake of paid leave, equal access to paid leave, and greater gender equality in the home and at work.

We know that COVID-19 has represented an unprecedented care burden for parents and other caregivers. At any given time during lockdowns, more than 60% of children have been remote schooling and many of us of all ages have been at home<sup>1</sup>. We know from our own lives and from research during the pandemic that women, and especially women of color, have borne the majority of the care work at home, and suffered in their careers as a result. Paid leave represents an urgent and obvious workplace policy and public policy to address this ongoing and urgent gender inequality, to support women in their caregiving roles and ensure they continue to stay and succeed in the workplace, and to encourage men to take paid leave in equal amounts to balance parenting and caregiving responsibilities.

### KEY FINDINGS



#### **Paid leave policies helped employers and employees weather the pandemic.**

The pandemic created significant economic, health, and safety challenges for companies and working people alike. Many businesses struggled to even keep their doors open and their workers employed amidst lockdowns and an economic downturn. Workers also faced their own individual crises, from uncertainties around job security, to juggling new realities at home with remote work, finding childcare, and managing their health and family members' health. In light of such challenges, this report shows that paid leave policies provided an important support for companies during the pandemic, ensuring greater employee morale

and workplace satisfaction, reduced rates of attrition and turnover, and acted as an effective recruitment tactic. Paid leave programs help employees feel supported and cared for and effectively able to take care of themselves and family members while remaining engaged with their employer.

## 2 **The pandemic accelerated a culture of caregiving, increasing demands for workplace flexibility and paid leave policies.**

Workplace attention to caregiving is front and center as a result of the pandemic and there is a growing demand for paid leave from an employee perspective. In response, companies are working to emphasize flexibility as key to their culture – something that may well last beyond the pandemic. Companies indicated that updating policies and shifting workplace culture can range from creating more flexible work schedules, asking people to prioritize their wellbeing, supporting all working people in their family care duties, lowering the expectation that employees should always be easily and instantly available, and finding creative ways to normalize the notion that all employees have needs and duties to care for themselves and care for those in their families. Employers are also using innovative and creative ways to respond to their employees' caregiving needs during the pandemic such as providing virtual family yoga or access to childcare services in the US.

## 3 **A work culture that promotes gender equality through equitable use of paid parental and caregiving leave can help stem the tide of women leaving the workforce.**

The effects of offering paid leave policies to employees for their caregiving needs and setting a tone that encourages uptake of paid leave, especially by male employees, can be seen in how gender equitable caregiving dynamics can occur at home. "Gender-equitable" means that women should not be penalized for taking leave, and also means that male employees should be encouraged to take paid caregiving leave as much as female employees, providing the opportunity for the equitable division of parenting and caregiving responsibilities. Female employees are more likely to take on caregiving responsibilities, and globally, we're seeing the toll that's taken as women leave the workforce. Three factors are crucial to preventing women from exiting the workforce – strong paid leave policies, flexible working culture that supports everyone's needs, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, and encouragement for men's uptake of leave, especially paid parental leave and men's uptake of the hands-on care work in their homes.

## 4 The pandemic has revealed a critical need for a permanent paid leave program in the US and accelerated support from the business community for a national policy.

The lack of a national paid leave program in the United States results in a patchwork of policies that covers a mere 20 percent of private sector workers and 26 percent of state and local government workers. While national paid leave public policy receives consistent public support, businesses are now joining the chorus. Our findings pointed to a clear trend: support among businesses for a national paid leave public policy may have reached a tipping point with small and medium sized businesses believing that a paid leave public policy will help them weather structural and economic volatility like a pandemic. Some key benefits of a national public policy would include alleviating financial burdens on businesses, making leave available equally for all working people not just those at corporations or living in states where paid leave programs are available, reducing ambiguity about what should be included in a paid leave public policy, and advancing a cultural awareness and acceptance of the importance of family caregiving and medical leave. By creating a support structure for employees and employers in a time of crisis, the First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) offers an important glimpse at the power of a national paid leave policy. The FFCRA helped many businesses offer paid leave to their employees and was a strong factor in ensuring that companies were able to retain the employees they had.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

Strong paid leave programs are serving as a vital tool for protecting businesses' and employees' economic security and health during a global pandemic. In the midst of structural shocks like the ongoing pandemic and resulting economic downturn, the role of the private sector is critical in advancing meaningful paid leave access for people across the globe and creating workplaces where uptake of paid leave is supported and encouraged. Paid leave policies should foster gender equity that can be extended at the workplace and at home: ensuring that women (nor men) are not penalized for taking leave; that men should be encouraged to also take leave; and that caregivers of all sexes should feel supported in their care duties.



#### Implement strong gender-informed paid leave company policies by taking the following actions:

- Create policies that apply equally to all employees (salaried, hourly, full-time, part-time, and subcontractors) and to all parents (birthing mothers as well as fathers and non-binary parents, adoptive, foster, those who become parents via surrogacy, and all other parents and guardians).

- Implement a paid caregiving policy that includes a minimum of 6 weeks paid leave available to care for a seriously ill family member.
- Implement a paid medical leave policy that includes a minimum of 6 weeks paid leave available to address an employee's own serious illness (not including sick days).
- Implement a parental leave policy that includes a minimum of 12 weeks of paid parental leave for all new parents. Additionally, birthing mothers may receive 6-8 weeks of short-term disability (paid at 100%).
- Pay special attention to the barriers that male caregivers face in taking leave given long-standing expectations that women are the primary caregivers in the case of heterosexual couples. Special attention should be paid to the realities of caregivers of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities as most leave policies often have a presumption of heterosexual couples.



### Create a workplace culture and foster leadership modeling so paid leave can be utilized and optimized by all employees to thrive:

- Ensure companies have formal paid parental leave policies and processes, which are clear, accessible, flexible, and equitable.
- Support a flexible working environment including working remotely and working around people's caregiving needs.
- Raise awareness and educate employees on the benefits of taking paid leave, looking specifically at barriers to women's uptake, re-entry and retention, and to men's specific barriers of taking and using leave.
- Position management to lead by example, modeling taking paid leave as a priority and fostering a culture of openness and encouragement.
- Dismantle workplace cultural barriers and restrictive social norms that hinder uptake and prevent equal caregiving.
- Set aside resources to investigate and identify these barriers (such as collecting gender and race disaggregated data on uptake of paid leave), as well as resources to incentivize the uptake of paid leave.
- Encourage partner organizations and others within their spheres of influence to also encourage uptake of paid parental leave, particularly among dads and all male caregivers.





## Join a growing chorus of businesses supporting a federal paid family and medical leave policy in the United States:

The growing momentum from the business community in support of public policy on paid leave is turning to action, as paid leave provisions included in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) expired at the end of 2020. The US Congress passed a new COVID Relief Package in December 2020, which does not extend the requirement for employers to provide emergency paid family and medical leave, instead allowing employers to claim tax credits for voluntarily provided emergency paid leave that is provided through March 31, 2021.

Businesses, and millions of employees, in the United States are now left without access to any federal paid leave program, as we enter the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

PL+US is mobilizing the business community to help pass federal public policy in the United States, and invites business leaders to join the effort today.

## Introduction

The ongoing public health and economic crises stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic have devastated families and communities across the world while reshaping innumerable aspects of daily life. Globally, as of 29 December 2020, there have been over 79 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 1.75 million deaths, as reported to WHO<sup>2</sup>. The resulting economic downturn has created staggering unemployment rates and business closures across the global economy and immeasurably damaged our fragile health and social safety nets.

Businesses globally have faced unprecedented challenges. From rolling closure orders, inconsistent regulatory guidance, work-from-home mandates, and a patchwork of emergency stimulus policies, many businesses have taken a huge hit to their economic bottom line and forced lay-offs, while others have had to close their doors entirely<sup>3</sup>. Across sectors and sizes, they have tried to keep employees and customers safe while also implementing new protocols, adapting existing company policies, and experimenting with new practices<sup>4</sup>.

Working people are also facing significant challenges. From the stress of uncertain job security, juggling remote work with childcare and at-home schooling, caring for sick family members, and protecting one's own health from the daily risk associated with work outside the home, working individuals are managing a set of work and caregiving demands that are unsustainable, if not impossible.

Paid leave policies, and the supporting workplace cultures that enable employees, especially male employees, to use available policies, have emerged as a clear antidote to the challenges faced by employers and employees alike. Further, the intersection of how government policies impact companies and their downstream effects on individuals is especially important when considering gender inequities in the workplace and at home (see Box 1). Paid leave policies (both medical and family leave) have shown to benefit countries, businesses, and working people consistently<sup>5</sup>, yet evidence of benefits during a time of crisis have been limited until now.

We recognize that race, ethnicity, immigration status, class, gender identity, and sexuality all play important roles in determining who has access to paid leave and which communities have been most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At present, many companies do not track data on race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity in relation to paid leave uptake. Going forward, to better understand barriers and opportunities to increase paid leave uptake, we urge companies to begin addressing this gap in intersectional demographic data.

**Box 1. Impact of pandemic on women leaving the workforce****COVID-19 HAS HAD A DIRECT AND MAJOR IMPACT ON GENDER INEQUALITY.**

The 2020 UN Women Report on Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19 shows that the loss of childcare support for millions and inconsistent school openings and closings, has also exacerbated existing childcare and caregiving challenges, almost entirely borne by women. This is coupled with the fact that female-dominated industries, like healthcare, education, eldercare, and hospitality have been economically hit the hardest, affecting the lowest paid the most, and women of color in particular. These are also the sectors where teleworking is not possible, and people are therefore more at risk from the virus. As a result, women have been exiting the workforce in greater numbers than men, prompting the popularization of the term 'she-cession'.

Research carried out by Oxfam, Promundo, and others finds that globally, women have faced higher job losses and a greater increase in the unpaid care burden during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys worldwide show that mothers and fathers have both increased the time spent in unpaid care during the ongoing pandemic, but this increase comes on top of the already unequal burden faced by women. Any effort to increase access to paid leave must consider how these policies can help redress this ongoing and urgent inequality.<sup>6</sup>

**Box 2. How paid leave can support fathers in their caregiving**

## HOW PAID LEAVE CAN SUPPORT FATHERS IN THEIR CAREGIVING.

**'State of the World's Fathers'** 2019 included multi-country survey data, led by Dove Men+Care and Promundo. The survey, which included more than 7 countries from North America, Europe, Asia and South Africa, confirmed that the majority of men who are fathers, or consider becoming fathers, want to take leave. However, many don't or feel constrained because of fear of suffering consequences in their job. Women have clearly faced these challenges for decades. That study and others have found that at the same time, men often don't feel supported by supervisors, by their male co-workers, and by their own families to prioritize taking leave. Equality in the workplace for women requires equality at home in terms of care duties and this in turn requires supporting men to do their fair share of the care work and to feel supported at workplaces in doing so.

**This report, by Paid Leave for the US (PL+US) and Promundo, in collaboration with the Parental Leave Corporate Task Force (PLCTF), seeks to understand how companies and governments support working people during a time of uncertainty and crisis – and what lessons can be learned for the future.**

Despite the negative impacts of the pandemic, including the unequal impact on women, and especially women of color, this unique moment in history has provided the possibility of building something better than we had before. The everyday innovation of businesses, employees, individuals, and policymakers have provided us with the opportunity to reimagine policies and practices for working families today – and for the future of work globally. This report highlights the nature of best practice in terms of paid leave policies during the COVID-19 pandemic across businesses globally, with a particular focus in the United States. Based on quantitative and qualitative findings directly from the business community, the report makes recommendations for both public policy and business practice that should endure post-pandemic.

## Methodology

This insights report is a quantitative and qualitative survey of businesses to assess the impact of paid leave policies on companies during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. PL+US and Promundo surveyed 40 companies globally, integrating inputs from executives and human resources teams and insights from in-depth interviews. The 40 companies represent more than half a million employees from industries including construction, communications, education, entertainment, finance, food services, hospitality, technology, retail, and more, and serve as representative sample of companies globally. Of the 40 companies, 17 report that they have a global presence while 24 report that they are only located in the United States.

Half of participating companies (n=20) have between 1 and 50 employees and are referred to as “small businesses” in this report. Companies with between 51 and 5,000 employees are referred to as “mid-size businesses” (n=16) and companies with more than 5,000 employees are referred to as “large businesses” (n=4). All companies, regardless of size, industry, or location, are assessed on the same markers informing a holistic picture of how representative companies have responded to the pandemic.

Participating companies have also been grouped evenly into two categories: those with “stronger” paid leave programs (n=20), and those with “weaker” paid leave programs (n=20). Categorizations are based on the total amount of paid parental leave, paid personal medical leave, and paid caregiving leave the companies offer employees, with companies with stronger policies typically offering three to six weeks or more in each category. Box 3 provides definitions for the types of leave discussed in this report.

The qualitative learnings are the result of interviews with executives and human resource teams at 17 of the participating companies, of which 4 are large multinational companies, 1 is a large business in the US, 4 are medium-sized companies in the US, and 8 are small companies in the US. All quantitative and qualitative reporting has been anonymized.

**Box 3. Definitions of types of paid leave**

Terms used throughout the report referring to paid leave that existed before and during the pandemic:

**Personal Medical Leave:** Time to address one's own serious illness. While globally this would include sick days, in the US, given that there are no national rules for sick days, medical leave is intended for serious longer-term illness or recovery and is usually measured in weeks as opposed to sick days which is usually measured in days.

**Parental Leave:** Time for new parents: mothers and fathers, to welcome a newly-arrived child (applies to adoption, fostering and birth). Parental leave outside the US may not necessarily include maternity and paternity leave, while in the US, this would include maternity and paternity leave.

**Family Caregiving Leave:** Time to care for a seriously ill family member; and during the COVID-19 pandemic, time to quarantine or care for a child whose school or place of care is closed.

High quality paid leave policy is defined by being inclusive of all three components.

## Lessons Learned

# 1 PAID LEAVE POLICIES HAVE HELPED EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES WEATHER THE PANDEMIC

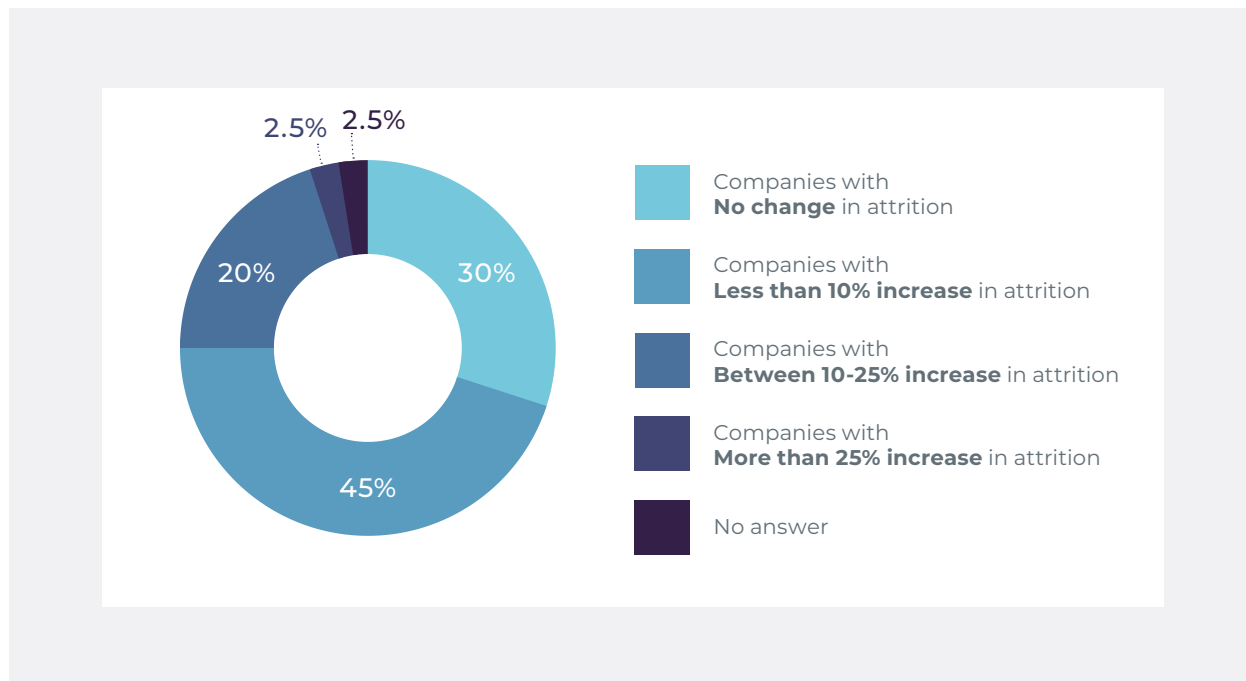
*“We are expanding parental leave to non-birth giving parents - we went from 2 weeks to 4 weeks of paid leave that can be taken intermittently for 3 months after adoption or partner giving birth. Also 80 hours of paid medical leave.”*

—Respondent from a small company in the US on how COVID-19 has impacted their employer-given paid leave policies

### The pandemic created significant challenges for companies and working people alike.

Across the 40 companies, 68 percent of companies saw some form of attrition in the past year (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Change in attrition from employees during the pandemic in 2020 compared to 2019**



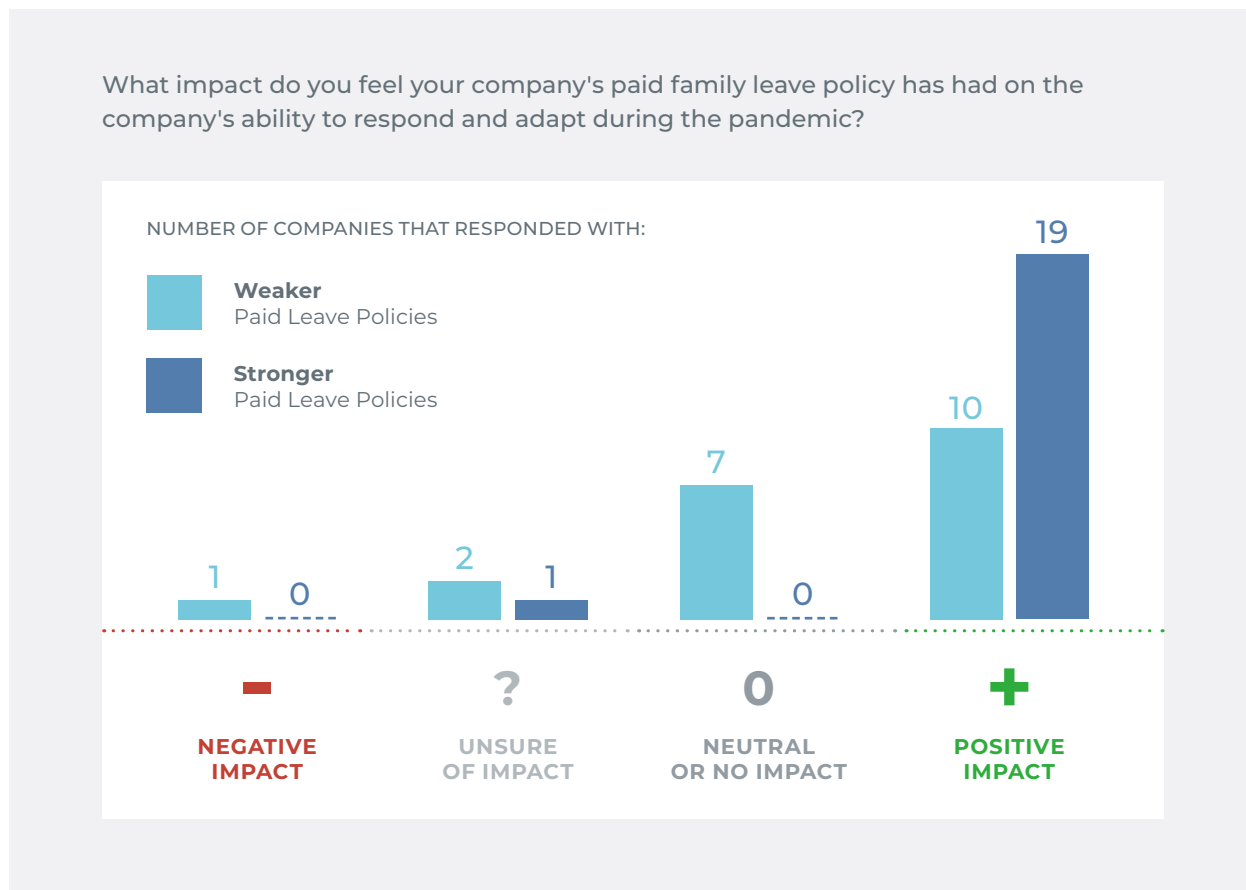


**In light of such challenges, the data show that paid leave policies were considered an important support for companies during the pandemic.**

Among the companies surveyed for this report, 72.5 percent of companies felt that their paid leave policy had a positive impact on their ability to respond and adapt to the pandemic. Among the 20 companies with stronger paid leave policies, 90 percent stated that paid leave policies had a positive impact on their ability to adapt to the pandemic (see Figure 2). As an executive at a mid-size company in the United States explained,

*“We’ve been giving paid leave for the past three years and we have already been providing flex hours before then. So we haven’t seen a huge impact of the pandemic. It has worked well to do flex hours for us. We were able to pivot into more of a flexible working culture because we’d already been doing it.”*

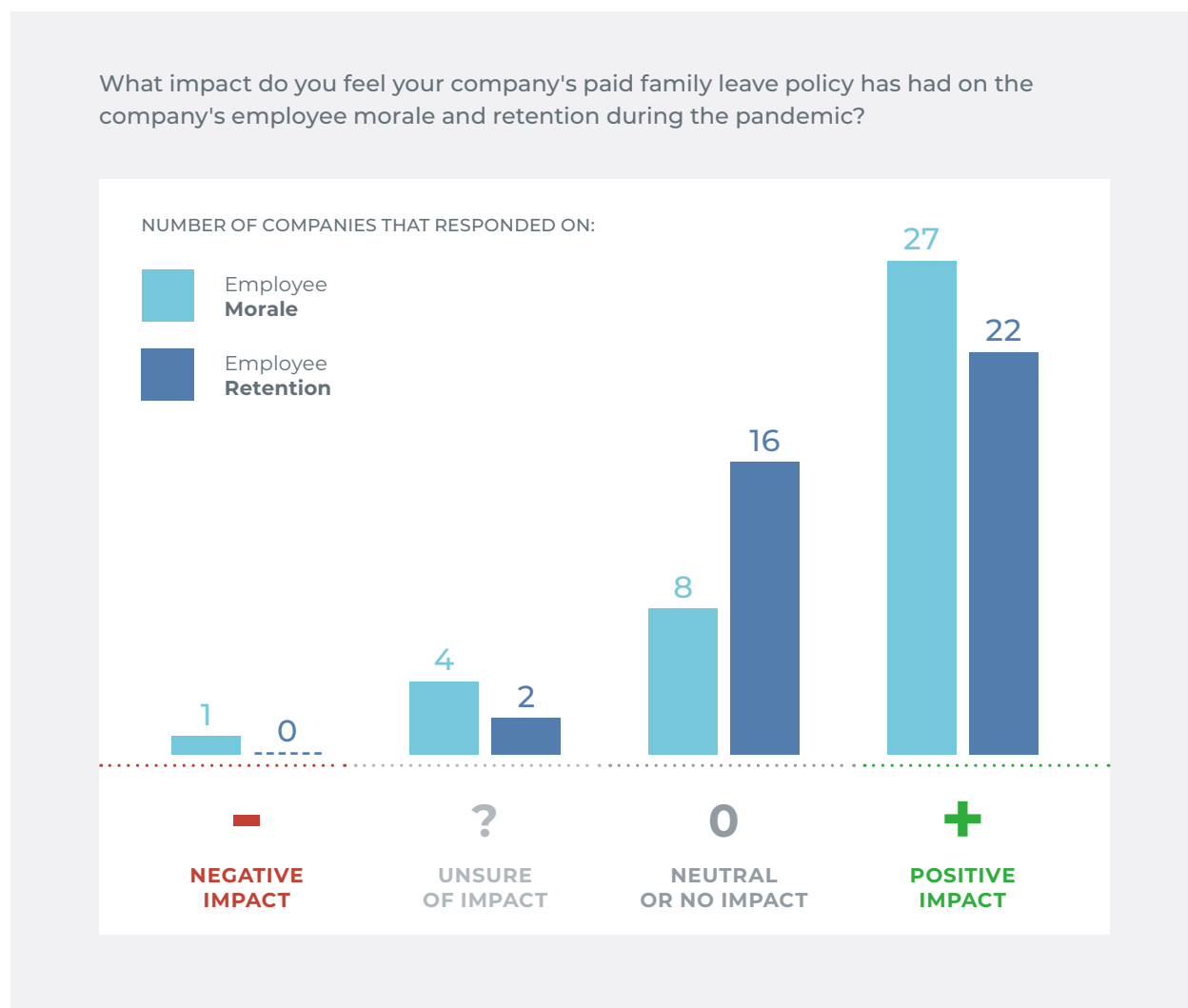
**Figure 2. Differences in ability to adapt to pandemic depending on strength of paid leave policy**



**Companies that offered paid leave policies also benefited from these policies by maintaining greater employee morale and workplace satisfaction and reducing rates of attrition and turnover.**

As seen in Figure 3, both globally and in the United States of America, most companies felt that paid leave policies had a positive impact on morale (n=27) and retention (n=22).

**Figure 3. Impact of company's paid family leave policy on employee morale and retention during the pandemic**



## The one-on-one interviews revealed that paid leave programs help employees feel supported and cared for, while perhaps also boosting productivity.

While companies faced challenges, workers were also facing their own crises during the pandemic, and paid leave programs were one tool to help these individuals. One restaurant owner in the United States highlighted the need for industry-specific data or anecdotes to help encourage people to use the paid leave provided to them because burnout is a big issue in their industry. Another human resources manager at a large multinational corporation with strong paid leave policies outlined the inherent differences in forcing employees to take unpaid leave or vacation time to deal with pandemic-related challenges versus providing separate paid medical and caregiving time off.

*“The objective of PTO<sup>7</sup> (Paid Time Off) is to recharge and re-energize. If someone takes their PTO to take care of someone, they're going to come back to work exhausted and be less productive. If you can facilitate [paid caregiving leave], that hopefully makes them feel really good about how the company thinks about them and provides the opportunity to do what they need to do for their family.”*

## The pandemic may also be further emphasizing how employers think about paid leave benefits as a competitive advantage and key strategy to attract and retain employees – many of whom were already paying careful attention to their company’s leave policies prior to the pandemic.

For prospective parents for example, based on a 2019 survey by the Boston College Center for Work and Family in 2019<sup>8</sup>, three-quarters of respondents said they were more likely to continue with their current employer because the employer offers expanded parental leave. Additionally, 30 percent of respondents reported an increase in loyalty to the employer as a result of such policies. During conversations for this report, several companies noted the importance of strong paid leave benefits as a key recruiting and retention tool. As we emerge from the pandemic, these policies are likely to be even greater drivers of talent attraction and recruitment.

*“One of the things that’s a great selling point to prospective employees is our benefits. We need to remain competitive. Not only does it help us ensure our workforce is healthy, but it also helps with retention. Why would you leave or go anywhere if your employer is taking care of you?”*

—Respondent from a small-sized company in the US on how COVID-19 has impacted their employer-given paid leave policies

**Across small, mid-size, and large companies, and across companies with weaker and stronger leave policies, there was a recognition that paid leave is now a necessity.**

At the time of the survey, of the 17 companies that had a global presence, 75 percent noted having some type of a global minimum standard for paid family and medical leave policies ranging anywhere from 8 weeks to 20 weeks of paid leave (in some combination of family and/or medical leave). There are some differences found within the United States of America (see Box 4).

**Box 4. Who is more likely to have employer-given paid leave policies in the US?**

Small businesses, defined as having 1-50 employees, are less likely to have formal paid leave policies than mid-size (51-5000 employees) or large-size businesses (over 5000 employees). Our quantitative data showed that 10 small businesses who are only in the US were categorized as having weaker policies as compared to 6 medium-sized businesses who are only in the US.

**It is also clear that companies are looking to the future and planning to further expand or update their existing paid leave policies to reflect the realities of the post-COVID working landscape.**

Among the companies surveyed, 35 percent answered “yes” to updating or expanding paid leave policies to meet workforce needs and/or protect customer safety and 45 percent answered maybe doing so. While businesses have put in place short-term policies in response to the pandemic, they recognize the long-term value of these new or expanded policies. Of the 18 companies that plan to update or expand their paid leave policies, 43 percent are planning to make those changes permanent.

**Overall, employers with strong paid leave policies experienced more stability in a time of global uncertainty, which respondents believe will contribute to their overall business viability.**

Paid leave policies offered employers an opportunity to provide the support employees needed for their health, caregiving, and parental responsibilities, without sacrificing their bottom line or facing arduous turnover costs.

*“Every company will need to change something. Parents of children, caretakers of elderly parents – that’s the majority of the workforce...if we don’t put in any form of parental/family caregiving policies...we will fall behind and we won’t be able to retain the talent we have at the organization and it will cost the company.”*

—Respondent from a large multinational company

## 2 THE PANDEMIC ACCELERATED A WORKPLACE CULTURE OF SUPPORTING CAREGIVING, INCREASING DEMANDS FOR WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY AND PAID LEAVE POLICIES

*“Pre-pandemic I thought we had a flexible work environment where people could set their hours, but we still revolved around 9-5 concept. Now since majority of team is working from home and balancing caregiving, flexibility is increasing and taking time for childcare or to go for a run or get away from the screen is acceptable. We don't have to be staring at a computer for 8 hours to have a productive day.”*

—Respondent from a small company in the US

**The pandemic has upended the notion of separation between work and family, illuminating the previously invisible caregiving demands that all families and all working people – male, female, and non-binary individuals – face.**

Families are now front and center. Whether employees are juggling care for a toddler while day cares are closed, having to drop meals off for elderly parents, or managing virtual schooling while on conference calls, caregiving needs have never been more visible in the workplace. Employers are seeing the impact of parenting, caregiving, and health challenges in a ground-breaking and unprecedented way. A head of human resources at a medium-sized business based in the United States noted that *“the pandemic has built empathy across the team – respect for the challenges that parents faced pre-pandemic.”*

**There is a growing demand for paid leave from an employee perspective.**

Among companies surveyed for this report, there is a general agreement that uptake of paid leave has increased since the pandemic began. 35 out of 40 total companies noted that at a minimum, 20 percent of their workforce took days off to care for a child or ill family member because of the coronavirus pandemic. Six companies noted that at least 50 percent of their workforce took time off. There might be some country-specific variations however (see Box 5).

**Box 5. Why uptake of leave may be hindered by the value placed on paid leave by the culture**

In the United States of America, respondents share a general hesitation about taking paid leave – irrespective of gender. Often taking leave is associated with the stigma of not being committed enough to one’s job. Despite being a global company, one head of human resources explained that specifically in the US offices:

*“There is an unspoken, informal norm around taking leave as not being all in for your company, as not being as dedicated or focused. There’s still some culture around - we don’t operate where taking a vacation is seen as the right thing to do. The United States doesn’t advocate vacation, which is why people think it’s so crazy to offer paid time off. Unfortunately, there is bias around career development. If I’m not here will they remember me. Am I seen as an eligible team member for promotion and advancement?”*

**In response, companies are working to emphasize flexibility as key to their culture – something that may well last beyond the pandemic.**

In our qualitative interviews, respondents across all sectors and small, medium, and large companies shared that there has been a work-culture shift where there is more acceptance of working remotely or work from home to support childcare and caregiving responsibilities. Others note that their organizational policies had to move “fast” to adapt to the changing realities. At one global firm, new leave policies were put in place in the spring of 2020 and have now been extended to March 2021, with a strong likelihood of becoming permanent policies.

*“We reacted as best as we could, this has been an experiment in adjusting week to week or month to month. Our top executive lives with his parents, who are older and high-risk, so we gave him flexibility - and extended that to other staff. For caregiving, employees who have children have flexibility.”*

—Medium-size employer in the US

Companies indicated that updating policies and shifting workplace culture can range from creating more flexible work schedules, “no video meetings on Fridays,” asking people to

prioritize their wellbeing, “self-care,” and family care, lowering the expectation that employees should always be easily available, and finding creative ways to normalize a caregiving culture.

*“We have implemented Fri-yays, basically one Friday off every single month – so that’s been helpful. We also have ETO (Emergency Time Off<sup>®</sup>). Because people are home with children – managing zoom and work, they can come up with a schedule that works best for them. If people are working less than 40 hours a week, they can supplement with ETO.”*

—Large business based in the US

### **To embrace flexibility and boost morale, employers are also using innovative and creative ways to respond to their employees’ caregiving needs during the pandemic.**

Several examples of how companies are integrating family into work were presented in the interviews. Some provide “virtual family yoga,” while others push for HR or leaders to play videos around the importance of putting families first before any presentation. At a large business based in United States, there is a yearly membership provided to employees for a babysitting company and to a pet care company. Other helpful solutions are to create employee resource groups within companies to support parents and HR teams in creating an environment that fosters paid family leave.

Companies are finding innovative ways to empathize with their employee’s caregiving needs as seen in this quote by a respondent at a medium-sized business in the United States:

*“We also changed our Slack emojis to include a caretaking emoji.”*

It’s worth noting that these types of policies, while beneficial, are not accessible to millions of working people in shift jobs and sectors where flexibility is not an option.

### **Women are more likely to use paid leave than men.**

Nearly half, 47.5 percent, of companies report that half or more of those who utilized paid leave were female (see Figure 4). This is not surprising since working individuals are situated within socio-cultural gender norms that disproportionately burden women with domestic and caregiving responsibilities (see Box 5). This also tracks with global data from before the COVID-19 pandemic began which found that fewer than half of dads took the full amount of leave they were entitled to under national policies<sup>10</sup>. Interestingly, 30 percent of the

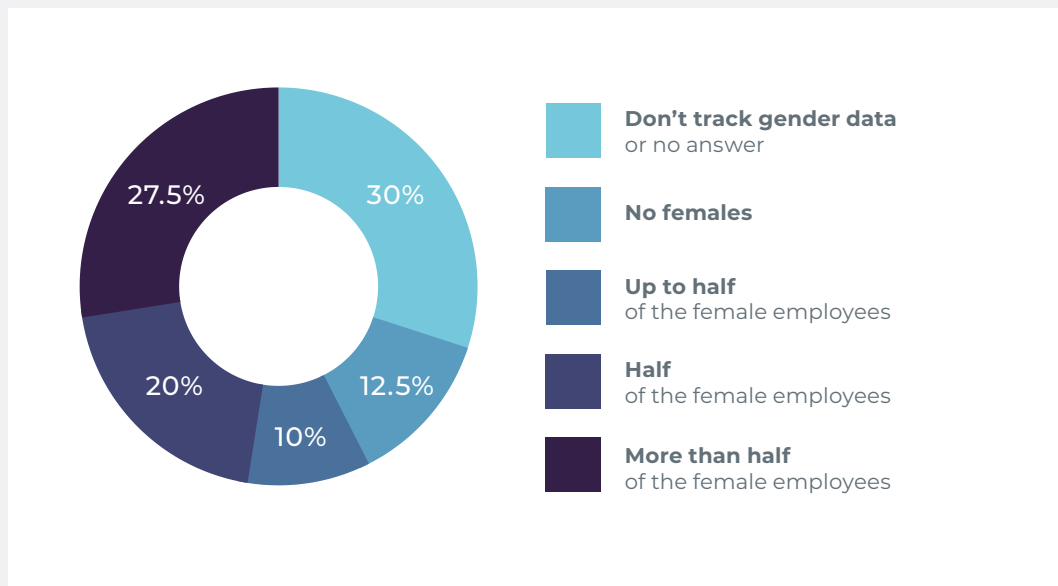


companies surveyed did not track gender data. Gender-disaggregated data is essential to understanding who is – and who is not – utilizing paid leave offered by the company. Developing family-friendly policies that promote gender equality should begin with collecting data disaggregated by gender to understand the factors that keep men and women from using their full entitlement of paid leave.

As noted earlier in the report, research carried out by Dove Men+Care, Promundo<sup>11</sup>, and others has confirmed the specific barriers that men continue to face in taking leave. Globally, women continue to carry out more than three times the daily care work at home, even as women’s participation in the paid workforce has increased significantly in recent years. UN Women and many international organizations agree that men’s greater participation in care work is key, along with adequate child care, to achieving full equality for women in the workforce. The fact that many companies think of their policies as gender-blind means that they are not paying attention to how the ongoing inequality in women’s work lives is tied to inequality in who does the care work, and who takes leave.

**Figure 4. Uptake of paid leaves for female employees**

Of employees who have taken days off to care for a child or ill family member because of the coronavirus pandemic, what percentage are female?



**Senior leadership plays a key role in setting a tone for the organization that makes everyone feel comfortable taking paid leave, regardless of gender, sexuality, or race.**

In our qualitative research, several companies noted that having their CEOs, especially male leaders, assert the importance of family caregiving, and particularly men's caregiving, has been a crucial factor in improving paid leave usage. At a global multinational company for instance, the CEO and COO are commonly credited by their employees for both creating excellent paid parental leave policies as well as encouraging employees to take their full leave for caregiving.

*“Every time we have a webcast with the CEO, the second thing out of his mouth is stop the grind, take time off for yourself. Take a vacation. It’s been a top-down effort from leadership. In order for you to be your best self at work, you need to be your best self in your life and take time.”*

—Respondent from a large multinational corporation

**Box 6. How do we stem the tide of women leaving the workforce as a result of the pandemic?**

# 3 PAID LEAVE AND A WORK CULTURE THAT PROMOTES GENDER EQUALITY CAN HELP STEM THE TIDE OF WOMEN LEAVING THE WORKFORCE

In a study of 55 countries, UN Women's Rapid Gender Assessments on the Impacts of COVID-19 found that women, who do the majority of the unpaid care and domestic work in every country in the world, have borne the greatest negative impact of COVID-19. Combined with the fact that women are also likely to work in sectors that are either low paid (globally, 70 percent of health care workers are women), the hardest hit (such as retail and hospitality), or informal (such as domestic work), the result is that women are exiting the workforce in record numbers. As of November 2020, across 55 countries, there were 1.7 times as many women as men outside the labor force (321 million women, compared to 182 million men). In the US in September 2020, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) monthly jobs report showed that more than 850,000 women dropped out of the workforce compared to 200,000 men.

A five-country study carried out by Oxfam and Promundo<sup>12</sup> found that women and men reported increases in care work at home during the ongoing pandemic, but that increase came on top of the already unequal burden on women. The study found that during the pandemic, women and men are doing more care of children but for women, the increase has meant a higher toll on their mental health, and greater strain on their paid work lives.

## Which factors can support women to stay in the workforce? This study found that **3 factors** interplay with each other:

**1. Strong paid leave policies** are key to supporting women who can then take time off and not have to worry about financial constraints. As one female CEO shared:

*"I think economics is a big part of it - women just aren't able to take weeks of unpaid time."*

**2. Flexible working culture that supports women's needs.** Women often face the 'motherhood penalty'. Executives and human resources managers we spoke with indicate some workplaces are still captive to the outdated notion that motherhood equates with a lack of career ambition.

*"There's still a stigma around motherhood. What will your male counterpart think? Who will get the promotion while you're out? People may think you are "just a mom" and your time will be spread thin."*

—Respondent from a small business based in the US

**3. Encouragement for men's uptake of leave,** especially paid parental leave. Despite having voluntary paid parental leave policies by employers, most people, especially fathers, do not take their full paid parental leave. A respondent from a large multinational corporation with strong paid parental leave policies explicitly noted that:

*"Many moms might take the full amount...What we find typically is dads took about three quarters of what they were eligible for."*

The data shows that companies can play a powerful role in creating a work climate that encourages men to be present and equitable caregivers and so reduces the gender gap in the workplace as well as at home. At a large multinational corporation, one global head of human resources explained that building awareness of policies has been helpful to ensuring that men take their allocated leave:

*"We make sure all parents are aware of our policies — so it's great to see that we have most fathers taking the full amount."*

Thus, the effects of offering paid leave policies to employees and setting a tone that encourages uptake of paid leave can be seen in how gender-equitable caregiving and gender-equitable working dynamics can occur at home. One respondent from a small business in the US shared that:

*"A VP at our company is splitting the time with her husband, works in the morning, takes care of kids in the afternoon, and then hops back to work later in the afternoon. We have some other employees with young kids who split responsibilities with their spouse, and make it work."*

## 4 NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY BENEFITS BUSINESS: US COMPANIES CALL FOR PERMANENT LEAVE PROGRAM

Since March 2020, it is clear that countries with governments that have put forth a national public policy for paid leave have fared better through the pandemic than those countries without governments that support such policies. In Germany for instance, the latest employer law passed in response to COVID-19 stipulates that employees who take leave to take care of their children (up to 12 years old) will be partially compensated by their company for up to 6 weeks. In other countries, the 2020 OECD report on supporting people and companies during COVID-19, finds that public policies have been updated to create more flexibility for working people to take time off work due to illness and caregiving needs. In some cases, countries have clarified that paid leave extends to cases of school and childcare closures, offered financial support to offset alternative childcare needs, and compensated employers for providing access to paid leave.

Contrary to these global examples, the US is one of the few countries in the world, and the only high-income country, that does not have a national paid leave public policy. The case study on the United States of America describes the nature of national policies and programs in the US during the pandemic and presents a unique opportunity to understand why a national public policy is important to the private sector (see Box 7).

### **Box 7. Case Study in the US: Pandemic reveals dire need for permanent paid leave programs**

*“For paid leave, lots of companies will pay lip service, but people will take it more seriously if it’s a societal thing and not company-by-company.”*

—Respondent from a small business based in the US

### **UNEQUAL ACCESS TO VOLUNTARY COMPANY POLICIES LEAVES MILLIONS BEHIND**

The United States is one of the few countries in the world that does not have a national paid leave policy. Without a national standard, states, cities, and employers are left to determine what, if any, paid leave to provide. This results in a patchwork of policies that covers a mere 20 percent of private sector workers and 26 percent of state and local government workers. While access to strong paid leave programs

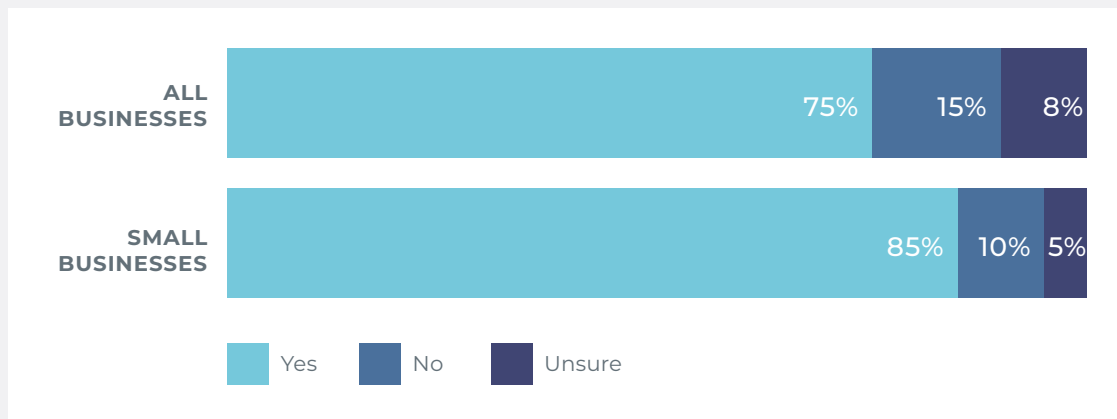
among private sector employees has increased in recent years, the benefits of such policies are still leaving far too many people behind — a disproportionate number of whom are women, people of color, essential workers in blue-collar jobs with no ability to telework, and low-wage working people as outlined by **PL+US** in a 2019 report. People who are self-employed and independent contractors, many of whom are women, also face significant barriers to accessing leave.

**55 percent of small businesses surveyed do not provide any paid family caregiving leave and 45 percent do not provide any paid medical leave - further highlighting the importance of public policy to democratize access to leave.**

### BUSINESSES SUPPORT NATIONAL PAID FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE POLICY

While a national paid leave policy receives consistent public support, businesses are now joining the chorus: this report found that support among businesses for a national paid leave policy may have reached a tipping point. More than three-quarters of businesses surveyed said that a national paid leave policy would help them be better positioned to weather future public health emergencies and economic crises – with support especially strong among small businesses, including those who do not currently offer paid leave.

**Figure 5. Business support for national public policy on paid family & medical leave**



*\* Data displayed reflects responses among businesses surveyed for this report as to whether or not a national public policy solution for paid family & medical leave would help their company be better positioned to weather future public health emergencies and economic crises.*

**Further, several companies (small and medium sized) noted that key benefits of a national public policy would include alleviating financial burdens on businesses, reducing ambiguity about what should be included in a paid leave policy, and advancing a cultural awareness and acceptance of the importance of family caregiving and medical leave.**

For small business owners, the burden of having to self-fund any leave is staggering and the financial relief for small businesses would be “life shifting.” One human resources manager at a food service provider noted how such a program would not only help his business, but would also help level the playing field for workers across different industries. Speaking about their sector, they said, “It would help legitimize the service and food industry as a career. In this sector, (unless you’re in a large chain), it’s hard to offer paid leave, 401K (retirement plan). A national paid leave public policy might help shift it to a job where you can have a family and a life.”

## EXISTING PUBLIC POLICIES ACTED AS A LIFELINE FOR BUSINESS – SHOWING WHAT NATIONAL PAID LEAVE CAN DO

Given the millions of working families in need of economic assistance as a result of the pandemic, the United States of America’s Congress passed The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) in April 2020. Among other benefits, this guaranteed emergency short-term paid sick leave benefits and longer-term paid family and medical leave policies. It expired on December 31, 2020. This emergency legislation provided support to employees and businesses alike.

### **What is FFCRA?**

*Employers with fewer than 500, but over 50 employees, and all public employers were required to provide up to two weeks of fully-paid sick leave (up to \$5,110) for immediate use to workers unable to work due to their own quarantine or symptoms of coronavirus, and up to two-thirds of regular pay for two weeks (up to \$2,000) for employees who were unable to work in order to care for someone in quarantine or whose child’s school or daycare is closed because of COVID-19. Separately, employers with fewer than 500, but over 50 employees, and all public employers were required to provide paid family leave to workers who were unable to work because their child’s school or daycare has closed due to coronavirus in the amount of two-thirds of their regular pay (up to \$10,000) for up to 12 weeks, after a 10-day unpaid waiting period.*

By creating a support structure for employees and employers in a time of crisis, the FFCRA offered an important glimpse at the power of a national paid leave policy. 11 of the 24 companies in the US indicated that their employees utilized the paid leave provisions, and in some instances, organizations took on the responsibility of administering benefits before the FFCRA provisions were finalized.

*“When schools were cancelled, we knew people would need leave to take care of their kids. FFCRA wasn't finalized, but we adopted it early and shouldered the cost to keep people from coming into work sick. We also knew people would have a terrible time with childcare and wanted them to feel supported.”*

—Respondent from a small business in the US

The FFCRA may also be a strong factor in ensuring that companies were able to retain the employees they had – of those companies in the US who used FFCRA, 55% noted that the paid leave provision included in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act helped them to retain employees.

In addition to the FFCRA provisions, as of the fall of 2020 when research was conducted for this report, five US states (California, New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington) and the District of Columbia had paid leave programs in place. Massachusetts' program began providing benefits in January 2021, and Connecticut and Oregon's programs are yet to be fully implemented. Based on survey responses, such programs may be playing a key role helping businesses and workers during the pandemic.

**Companies based in states with state-administered paid leave programs were more likely to provide strong paid leave for their employees than companies based in states without such policies.**

Nearly half of companies that operate in these states said those programs were helpful to weather the pandemic.

**In the US, the pandemic has exposed the gaps in our social safety net and highlighted longstanding gender inequities at work and at home.**

This has come at the expense of businesses, employees, and communities, underscoring the role we all have to play in developing solutions to fix what is broken. While the private sector continues to expand access to paid leave policies, there is a timely opportunity for government to accelerate access to paid leave for all working people through national public policy. In doing so, government not only secures a baseline of economic security for working families, but it also supports businesses by standardizing policy, reducing cost, and building resilience to weather future economic or public health crises.



## Recommendations for Business Leaders

Strong paid leave programs have served as a vital tool for protecting businesses' and employees' economic security and health during a global pandemic. Even as the global community moves beyond this current crisis, paid leave programs will remain a smart investment against future macro-level shocks. In parallel, a cultural shift is emerging that recognizes and values caregiving as a universal demand, not only during a global pandemic, but also as a commonplace reality deserving of good policy solutions, from strong paid leave to more flexible workplace practices.

In the midst of structural shocks like the pandemic, the role of the private sector is critical in advancing meaningful paid leave access for people across the globe and creating workplaces where uptake of paid leave is supported and encouraged. Such policies are not only central to helping employers and employees respond to the current crisis, they're also key to promoting the wellbeing of businesses, communities, and families in the years and decades ahead.



## IMPLEMENT STRONG GENDER-INFORMED PAID LEAVE COMPANY POLICIES BY TAKING THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- **Create policies that apply equally** to all employees (salaried, hourly, full-time, part-time, and subcontractors) and to all parents (birthing mothers as well as fathers and non-binary parents, adoptive, foster, those who become parents via surrogacy, and all other parents and guardians).
- **Implement a paid caregiving policy** that includes a minimum of 6 weeks paid leave available to care for a seriously ill family member.
- **Implement a paid medical leave policy** that includes a minimum of 6 weeks paid leave available to address an employee's own serious illness (not including sick days).
- **Implement a parental leave policy** that includes a minimum of 12 weeks of paid parental leave for all new parents. Additionally, birthing mothers may receive 6-8 weeks of short-term disability (paid at 100%).
- **Pay special attention to the barriers** that male caregivers face in taking leave given long-standing expectations that women are the primary caregivers in the case of heterosexual couples. Special attention should be paid to the realities of caregivers of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities as most leave policies often have a presumption of heterosexual couples.

Company policies support employees by providing insulation from economic hardship and affording time for medical and caregiving needs. At the same time, such policies help businesses by improving recruitment and retention.

[Click here](#) for additional resources and one-on-one support in creating a new or expanded paid leave policy at your company.



## CREATE A WORKPLACE CULTURE AND FOSTER LEADERSHIP MODELING SO PAID LEAVE CAN BE UTILIZED AND OPTIMIZED BY ALL EMPLOYEES TO THRIVE:

- **Ensure companies have formal paid parental leave policies** and processes, which are clear, accessible, flexible, and equitable.
- **Support a flexible working environment** including working remotely and working around people's caregiving needs.
- **Raise awareness and educate employees on the benefits of taking paid leave**, looking specifically at barriers to women's uptake, re-entry and retention, and to men's specific barriers of taking and using leave.
- **Position management to lead by example**, modeling taking paid leave as a priority and fostering a culture of openness and encouragement.
- **Dismantle workplace cultural barriers and restrictive social norms** that hinder uptake and prevent equal caregiving.
- **Set aside resources** to investigate and identify these barriers (such as collecting gender and race disaggregated data on uptake of paid leave), as well as resources to incentivize the uptake of paid leave.
- **Encourage partner organizations** and others within their spheres of influence to also encourage uptake of paid parental leave, particularly among dads and all male caregivers.

[Click here](#) for additional resources for employers on designing and implementing workplace policies that encourage more fathers to use all the leave they are entitled to, for the benefit of themselves, their families, their workplaces, and society as a whole.



## JOIN A GROWING CHORUS OF BUSINESSES SUPPORTING A FEDERAL PAID FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES:

The growing momentum from the business community in support of public policy on paid leave is turning to action, as paid leave provisions included in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) expired at the end of 2020. The US Congress passed a new COVID Relief Package in Dec 2020, which does not extend the requirement for employers to provide emergency paid family leave, instead allowing employers to claim tax credits for voluntarily provided emergency paid leave that is provided through March 31, 2021.

Businesses, and millions of employees, in the United States are now left without access to any federal paid leave program, as we enter the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

PL+US is mobilizing the business community to help pass federal public policy in the United States, and invite business leaders to [join the effort today.](#)

## Endnotes

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  - 9 According to the International Labour Organization, there are situations when an employee needs to take time off suddenly and unexpectedly, for example when his or her child falls ill or the water mains at home springs a leak. In cases like this, employees may take emergency leave.
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  - 11 Ibid.
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## PRESENTED BY

### **Paid Leave for the U.S. (PL+US)**

PL+US (Paid Leave for the United States) is the national campaign to win paid family and medical leave for every working person in the US. PL+US has helped win paid family leave for nearly 8 million people through our transformative workplace campaigns at companies like Walmart, Starbucks, CVS and more in partnership with employees, employers, consumers, and investors.

Learn more at: [paidleave.us](https://paidleave.us)

### **Promundo**

Founded in Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women, girls, and individuals of all gender identities. Promundo is a global consortium with members in the United States, Brazil, Portugal, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Chile that collaborate to achieve this mission by conducting cutting-edge research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling up high-impact interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international campaigns and advocacy initiatives to prevent violence and promote gender equality.

For more information, see: [www.promundoglobal.org](http://www.promundoglobal.org)

### **Parental Leave Corporate Task Force**

The Parental Leave Corporate Task Force, established in June 2019, champions access to parental leave for dads everywhere. Formed of leading business and civil society organizations, it aims to accelerate solutions that improve access to and uptake of parental leave for dads – ultimately contributing to gender equality and aiding economic growth and development.

To find out more, please visit: [www.leavefordads.com](http://www.leavefordads.com)

## PAID LEAVE AND THE PANDEMIC:

Effective Workplace Policies and Practices For a Time of Crisis and Beyond

**JANUARY 2021**

*Prepared by PL+US and Promundo, in collaboration  
with the Parental Leave Corporate Task Force*

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corporate task force