

## Conversations with the Experts

### Work-Family Policy: Raising the Global Floor



**Jody Heymann**

**Bio:** Jody Heymann holds a Canada Research Chair in Global Health and Social Policy and is the Founding Director of the Institute for Health and Social Policy at McGill University. An internationally renowned researcher on public policy and equity, she has authored and edited over 150 publications, including *Profit at the Bottom of the Ladder* (Harvard Business Press, forthcoming), *Raising the Global Floor* (Stanford University Press, 2009), *Trade and Health* (McGill Queens University Press, 2007), *Forgotten Families* (Oxford University Press, 2006), *Healthier Societies* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Unfinished Work* (New Press, 2005). Dr Heymann received her PhD. in Public Policy from Harvard University, where she was selected in a university-wide competition as a merit scholar, and her MD with honors from Harvard Medical School. She trained in Pediatrics at the Children's Hospital of Boston. Her work has been featured widely—on CNN, Good Morning America, Fox News, and NPR, among other leading national and international media.

#### An Interview with Jody Heymann by Julie Weber and Mary Curlew

**Weber:** Please tell us about how you became involved in the field of work-family policy, and when and why you decided to study *global* work-family policy?

**Heymann:** It was concern about issues of equity that brought me to the field of work-family policy. Recognizing not only that we were very unlikely ever to achieve real equity between men and women unless we addressed work-family issues, but also that we were extremely unlikely to be able to address inequalities across social classes unless we did something about work-family policy.

In terms of deciding to study global work-family policy, the impetus was working in other parts of the world and having colleagues tell me that the issues were just as pressing or more so in their own countries and contexts. This happened from poor communities in Chiapas, Mexico, to AIDS-devastated communities in Botswana, and after it happened in one country after another, we decided to develop a more systematic approach to looking globally.

**Curlew:** What have you learned from studying global work-family policies, and how does the U.S. measure up with the rest of the world?

**Heymann:** Unfortunately, what we have learned in terms of the U.S. is that the U.S. is far behind the rest of the world. To take a few examples, 163 countries around the world guarantee paid sick leave; the U.S. does not. 164 countries guarantee paid annual leave; the U.S. does not. 177 countries guarantee some form of paid leave for new mothers; the U.S. does not. This last example puts us in the company of only a few countries, including Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, Sierra Leone, and Samoa. Papua New Guinea might not deserve to be in the company of the U.S., because you can use your 6 days of paid sick leave as maternity leave there. 132 countries provide breastfeeding breaks; the U.S. does not. The list goes on. The U.S. is far behind practically the entire world when it comes to guaranteeing any kind of legal right to basic benefits.

**Weber:** Do you think there are any strengths to the work-family policies in the U.S.? Are there any areas in which the U.S. does well?

**Heymann:** People often ask, "Doesn't the U.S. provide much of this on a voluntary basis?" The answer is that while U.S. companies provide more on a voluntary basis than companies typically would in a poor country, they still don't provide enough to have us catch up to anywhere near most of the world's strong economies. In those poor countries, they guarantee benefits to everybody in their workforce.

However, the U.S. has other areas of policy that are remarkably strong. One example, in the area of work policy, is the equality given in the Americans with Disabilities Act. But when it comes to work-family policy, we are far behind.

**Weber:** Were you surprised by any of your findings in your most recent book, *Raising the Global Floor*?

**Heymann:** I was struck by how clear the message that these policies are affordable was from the findings. When you look, for example, at the world's most competitive countries, almost all of them provide these basic benefits. 14 out of 15 of the world's most competitive countries over a 10-year period provide paid sick days; the only one that doesn't is the U.S. 14 out of 15 provide paid annual leave; the only one that doesn't is the U.S. 13 out of 15 provide paid maternity leave, and the only ones that don't are the U.S. and Australia, and Australia will be providing it next year. The clarity with which this came through, that these policies are economically feasible, is remarkable. Alison Earle and I thought they were affordable, but we did not realize when we began our work that the results would be so overwhelming.

**Curlew:** What do you think deters the passage of work-family legislative policies, such as paid family leave and paid sick days, in the U.S.?

**Heymann:** I think there have been at least two factors deterring these policies in the past. One factor is that there has been a real question as to whether these policies are affordable. For those who understood the benefits of these policies but truly wondered whether we could compete economically while having them, I think we have put that question to rest with this global data, both with our findings concerning the most competitive countries around the world and with our findings on the affluent countries that have maintained low unemployment. Overwhelmingly, these low-unemployment countries also provide these basic benefits and protections at work.

The second factor is political. Some business lobbying groups oppose any legislation that provides any basic right to working American men and women. This is certainly not true in all businesses. There are businesses providing benefits and organizations that are willing to testify to the fact that this is affordable. However, most business lobbyists have been opposed to work-family legislation. This political history can only be overcome in the U.S. with an equally vocal voice on behalf of American working families.

**Curlew:** Do you find opposition when you look at each piece of legislation, for example, looking at paid sick days versus annual leave? Do you find the deterrents to be similar?

**Heymann:** Each time work-family legislation comes up before Congress, those opposing it have been similar groups. Whether it is Family Medical Leave expansion or sick leave, for example, the arguments have been quite similar. In terms of annual leave, this is treated as a non-starter in the U.S., although legislation was introduced in the U.S. this year. This is remarkable. As you can tell by the numbers, the overwhelming majority of the world assumes everyone will have annual leave.

**Weber:** Is there another country that is very similar to the U.S. politically and economically that has successfully passed these work-family legislative policies? What is the reason that the legislation has been successful there and not here?

**Heymann:** When you begin to realize that most of these major policies have been passed in at least 150 of the world's 192 countries, you understand that indeed there are both many countries that are similar to the U.S. politically or economically, as well as ones that differ. With 177 countries guaranteeing paid maternity leave, for example, no matter what dimension you measure the U.S. on—economic output, political attitudes, history as a frontier country—you will find countries that have similar socioeconomic conditions or similar history that have passed legislation.

There are two chief ingredients of some of the countries that have been most successful in passing this legislation. One is that they have been able in their political system to balance the needs of business and the needs of working women and men, and their children. The second is that in many of these countries, both people representing employees and those representing employers recognize that there is real economic return to investing in the better health and the associated better productivity of the workforce.

**Curlew:** What further academic research do you think could be done to move this national policy agenda forward?

**Heymann:** It would be valuable to have a more thorough understanding of the range of how these policies are formulated. For each of these policies—maternity leave, paternity leave, sick leave, annual leave, breastfeeding

breaks—there is a range of ways that they have been designed. In fact, the world offers many natural experiments in design. It would be great to know what are the benefits and limitations of all the different approaches. I think that would inform policy development in countries that already have legislation, as well as policy development in countries, like the U.S., that don't.

It is also important to recognize in the U.S. that a lot of what needs to be done at this stage is outside of research. Americans are going to need to increasingly speak to their representatives about how important it is that we all have these basic rights.

**Weber:** How much longer do you think it is going to take to have these voices united?

**Heymann:** I think it is very encouraging that there are more groups organizing around these issues now. I think the electronic wave of organizing has provided new avenues for people to reach out across affected groups that didn't formerly exist.

**Curlew:** What is your next related project?

**Heymann:** We have a parallel set of projects to this public sector project that will be coming out in May. We looked at what companies around the world are doing to improve the conditions of their poorest workers while economically succeeding. It examines the business case.

There need to be public sector guarantees of the basic floor—that's what *Raising the Global Floor* is all about. Businesses also need to take steps above and beyond the required floor—particularly for the poorest workers and for the workers with the least formal education. Even those companies that are often lauded for providing improved working conditions rarely provide supports all the way down their corporate ladder. So that is our next initiative that will be coming out. It will be called Profit at the Bottom of the Ladder.

**Weber:** That sounds very exciting and is related to our next question: What more can businesses do to help?

**Heymann:** I think there are two things that businesses can do to help. When legislation comes forward, those businesses that are already providing paid sick leave, paid parental leave, and paid annual leave, and are succeeding in the American environment while providing them, can step up to the plate, come to Congress, and testify about the feasibility and value of these policies. These firms obviously know it's feasible to provide these basic benefits. They value it; they've chosen to do it. But speaking out about it is an enormously important contribution to ensuring that the same floor of decent conditions is available to all Americans.

The second thing they can do beyond legislation is to be known as places for innovation on further improving working conditions while economically succeeding. That's the story in *Profit at the Bottom of the Ladder*.

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