

Parental and Family Leave Policies in the California Construction Industry

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Struggles between work life balance often result in lower levels of job and life satisfaction, and higher rates of inefficiency and employee turnover, with varying impact on employees based on seniority, gender and parenthood. Policies such as paid parental leave have shown positive effects on work life balance, but there is a lack of information on leave policies within the American construction industry. Focusing on California, this research aimed to determine employee's understanding, use and acceptance of these leave policies. Using a survey, we gain a better understanding of these goals. Rates of confidence in knowledge of paternal and family leave policies were equal among both genders, however women were more confident in their knowledge of their company's maternity leave policy than men. These confidence rates for all policies rise further among parents. As a trend among all leave policies, individuals see peers take parental and family leave more often than their supervisors. In questions looking at support and acceptability of personal leave policy use, all women who did not have children responded strongly agree to all questions. Mothers responded to these same questions with a greater variety of responses including disagree. This data shows that HR professionals and upper management should focus on employee understanding leave of rights as well as creating a positive and supportive culture around the use of these leave policies.

Key Words: Parental Leave, Family Leave, Construction Industry, Work-Life Balance, Women in Construction

Introduction

The fight over paid parental and family leave has long existed within the United States of America (US). The US is currently the only country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that does not have any form of nationally recognized paid parental leave. Within the US, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is the only national leave policy. FMLA consists of '12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave per year for those who have work a minimum 1,250 hours by all public agencies, all public and private elementary and secondary schools, and companies with 50 or more employees' (U.S. Department of Labor). There is no US national policy

regarding paid family leave, but 13 states and the District of Columbia have passed paid leave laws according to the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Given that research indicates that there many benefits to paid parental and family leave including benefits to the parents, the child and the companies parents work for. However, there exists a limited amount of research on family and parental leave, paid or otherwise, within the context of the construction industry. The purpose of this study is to start determining the current employee understanding, perceptions and usage of parental and family leave policies within in the United States (US) construction industry by first exploring these policies in California. Potential benefits associated with the study include creating an inclusive conversation around the experiences relating to parental and family leave within the industry, while gaining understanding of how these perceptions impact employee satisfaction and performance.

Literature Review

Work-Life Balance

Work Life Balance (WLB) has no singular definition within sociology but is generally thought of as the balancing of demands between paid work, family life and leisure. While there is no singular definition of WLB, the impact of imbalance can be widespread. A study conducted in 2002 on the marital or relationship satisfaction in Australian civil engineers suggested that increased work demand and hours had a negative correlation to relationship satisfaction (Lingard and Sublet). The same study also suggested a link between jobs that have high role conflict, which Lingard and Sublet relate to a construction engineers' conflict between 'professional standards and budget constraints', spills into conflict at home (2002, p. 513). Focusing more on job satisfaction, a 2013 study by E. Kent Malone and Raja Issa titled *Work-Life Balance and Organizational Commitment of Women in the US Construction Industry* found that employees reported the following as creating the 'most profound negative impact on job satisfaction and desire to remain with the employer':

- Attitudes of the owner or manager: condescension, poor or lack of communication, and a "good ol' boy" atmosphere
- Fairness and equality: in pay, responsibility and authority
- Not feeling respected or valued as an employee

Malone and Issa go on to suggest that the lack of WLB policies experienced by the study participants may have contributed to not feeling valued but noted that there can be additional factors influencing these perceptions not captured by in the study (2013, pp. 96-97). A Finnish study, looking at general municipal workers and their experiences, found a strong association between negative spillover from work to family and the intentions to change jobs and industry or withdraw from work (Forma, 2009). While this study is not construction industry centric, it does start to show the complex matrix and influence that WLB, relationship satisfaction, job satisfaction and employee retainment have on one another.

But how is WLB integrated? There is no singular response to this question, just like there is no singular definition. There are, however, policies and initiatives that exist to help ease the conflict between work and home. Some of the most well know of these policies and initiatives are promoting mental and emotional health, flexible scheduling, and family leave. While research indicates that these policies are important, their success is impacted based on support via the organizational culture

(Kalev & Dobbin, 2022). Naoum et.al (2020) argues ‘that the strength of an organizational culture is a result of “internalization” and acceptance of the beliefs and values of the organization by its members’ (as cited in Naoum, 2011, p. 145). Meaning that the organizational culture is linked to all members of the organization. In order to change company culture to be more supportive of taking advantage of WLB practices, Francis and Lingard point out that change ‘needs to be driven from the top down and sensitivity training for middle managers and supervisors may also be required’ (2002, p. 34). Thus, in order to receive the positive benefits of WLB, increased work and relationship satisfaction and lowered employee turnover, it is in the interests of company leadership to implement and encourage participation in WLB policies and initiatives.

Parental and Family Leave Policies in the Construction Industry

The research on parental and family leave policies in the Construction Industry, within an US context, is limited. Research on this topic within an Australian context is more prevalent, but in order to better understand how this research may apply we must acknowledge the similarities and differences between the two industries and policies that impact them. The Australian and US construction industries both experience similar percentages of women within the industry and have been close in range over the last three decades. Currently, the percentages of women are 10% in Australia and 10.9% in the US (Llyod, 2023; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Most of the studies going to be discussed happened in the early 2000s, when Australia, like the US, did not have a paid parental and family leave policy (Francis & Lingard, 2002). It should be noted that while the US’ FMLA only covers 12 weeks of leave, the Workplace Relations Act of 1996 provides workers in Australia up to 52 weeks of unpaid leave (Francis & Lingard, 2002).

Lingard and Lin found in their research of women on parental leave in the Australian construction industry, that a large minority at 22.9% that they were ‘unlikely or very unlikely to take maternity leave while working with their present employer’ (2003, p. 21). Lingard and Lin note that the reason of this is not clear although could be due to forgoing childbirth or using partners parental leave instead (2003, p.21). Regarding paid maternity leave, only 35.3% of respondents indicated receiving any duration of pay during leave with the modal duration of weeks being six (Lingard & Lin, 2003, p. 20). Additional research by Lingard concludes that the additions of paid parental leave provisions and part-time work can help attract and retain staff at construction companies (2002, p. 34). These studies show that within the Australian construction industry, the positive effects of family-friendly policies are known, and the application of these policies is spotty as in the US.

Parental and Family Leave Policies in California

California Family Rights Act (CFRA) expands upon FMLA through lowering the company size requirement to 5 or more employees for private employers as well as expands the types of family members for which you can take leave to include extended familial relationships, and relationships equivalent to family (State of California Civil Rights Department, 2023). Pregnancy Disability Leave (PDL) is an extension of CFRA, that provides up to four months of job protected leave to individuals who are disabled due to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions (State of California Civil Rights Department, 2022). California Paid Family Leave (PFL) is another California policy that provides benefit payments to individuals who are using CFRA. These benefit payments are only for eight weeks, cover only 60 to 70 percent of wages and is only available for those who pay into California State Disability Insurance in the last five to 18 months (State of California Employment Development Department). Lastly, Employees who work San Francisco can receive additional

payment benefits provided via employers through the Paid Parental Leave Ordinance (City and County of San Francisco, 2023).

Methodology

To assess the different types of parental and family leave policies in the construction industry, while also evaluating individual's perception and satisfaction of these policies, an anonymous online survey was utilized. This survey employed the use of 20 quantitative and qualitative questions to address the research goals and to collect demographic data. These questions are a mix of multiple-choice questions, Likert scales and a free response question.

This survey targeted at individuals who work in the construction industry in the state of California. The decision to focus solely on individuals the state of California came from the need to be able to compare policies seen in the industry to a common framework. Given that Cal Poly is a California State University, limiting the scope of the survey within the California made the most sense. The survey was distributed to Cal Poly's Construction Management Advisory Council (CMAC) via Construction Management Department. Additionally, the survey was posted on my personal LinkedIn profile, which was then shared by a construction industry HR professional, and my Subject Matter Expert (SME) Stacy Kolegraff. The survey collected responses for two weeks before analysis of results began.

Results

The first section of questions was aimed at determining eligibility for this survey in two key areas: working in the construction industry, and working and receiving benefits in the state of California. The survey collected 47 initial respondents, but 10 participants were deemed ineligible due to response to the questions above. A total of 37 respondents moved forward in the survey.

The second section looked respondent demographic and experience questions. Of the 37 total respondents, 35.1% identified as female, 62.2% identified as male, and 2.7% preferred not to answer. Looking at age of respondents, the largest group was age 45-54 at 29.8% of respondents, followed by age groups 25-34 and 35-44 at 18.9% each, and lastly age groups 18-24 and 55-64 at 16.2% each. When looking at the number of children each respondent had 32.4% had no children, and 70.3% had one or more children. Respondents were also asked to indicate how many employees their company had. The majority of respondents worked at companies with 100 or more employees at 81.1% of total responses, 20-49 employees were 13.5% of responses, and 5-19 employees were 5.4% of responses.

The third section of the survey had respondents rate how well they knew their company's leave policies utilizing a 5-point Likert scale. Figure 1 asked respondents to rate the statement 'I know my company's maternity leave policy' 84.6% of female respondents indicated "agree" or "strongly agree" whereas only 73.9% of men indicated the same. Focusing on respondents with children, the "agree" and "strongly agree" rating increased to 100% of females and 88.9% of men regarding knowledge of their company's maternity leave policy. Figure 2 asked the same question but focused on paternity leave. This question saw rating for female respondents decrease to 69.2% for women overall, and 71.4% for women with children. For male respondents, 69.6% indicated "agree" or "strongly agree" and this value rose to 88.9% when isolating men with children. Figure 3 asked respondents to rate the statement 'I know my company's family leave policy' 69.2% of female respondents indicated "agree" or "strongly agree" nearly matching men at 69.6%. Focusing on respondents with children, the "agree" or "strongly agree" rating rose slightly for women at 71.4% but jumped up to 88.9% for men.

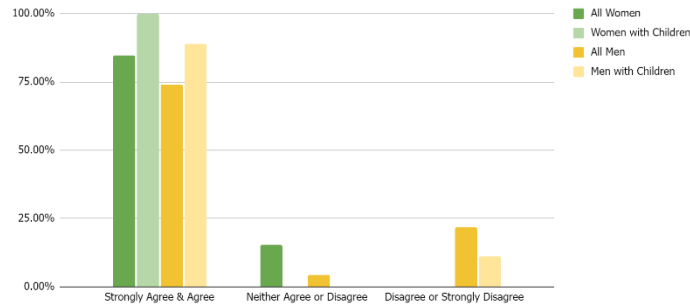


Figure 1. Rating of statement ‘I know my company’s maternity leave policy.’

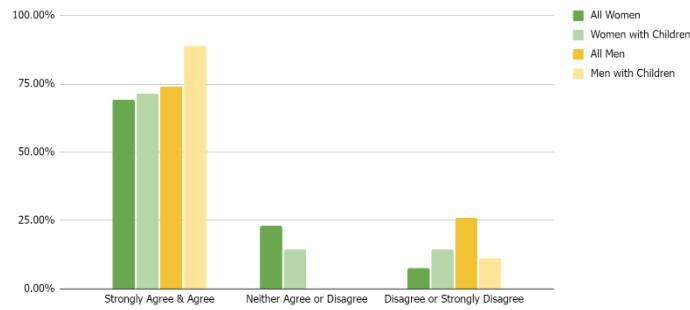


Figure 2. Rating of statement ‘I know my company’s paternity leave policy.’

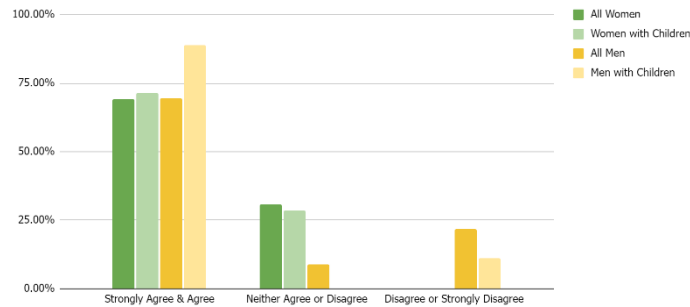


Figure 3. Rating of statement ‘I know my company’s family leave policy.’

The fourth section had respondents rate their agreeance with the following statements regarding having seen supervisors and peers take advantage of parental and family leave policies through use of a Likert scale, see Figure 4. These responses were further sorted via company size of the respondents. In statements about superiors taking advantage of parental and family leave policies, 100% of “agree” or “strongly agree” responses come from respondents from companies with 100 or more employees. Additionally, rates for peer utilization for all leave types exceeded utilization by supervisors.

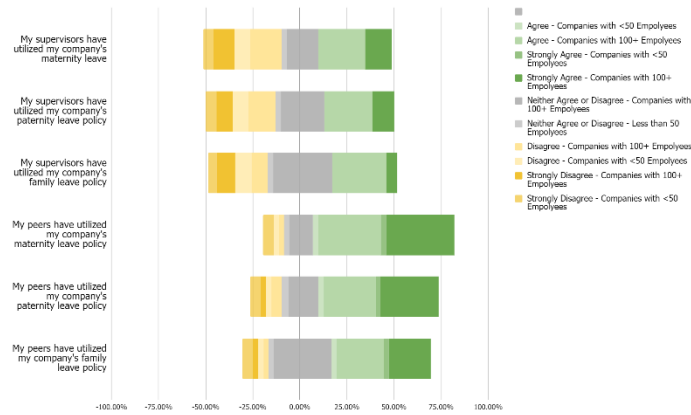


Figure 4. Rating of supervisor and peer policy utilization statements

Figures 5 and 6 look at the average response to five statements pertaining to organizational support for use of parental and family leave policies. Figure 5 shows that 100% of responses from women without children were “strongly agree” and that women with children show greater variation of response, including a ‘disagree’ rate of 14.3%. For male respondents, Figure 6 shows the differences in average response between men with and without children.

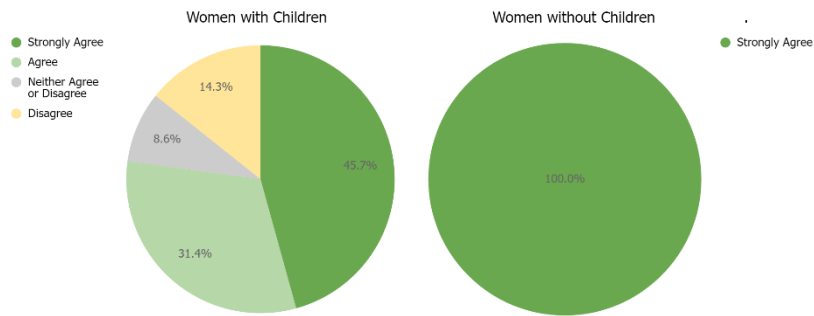


Figure 5. Rating of women's responses to organizational support statements

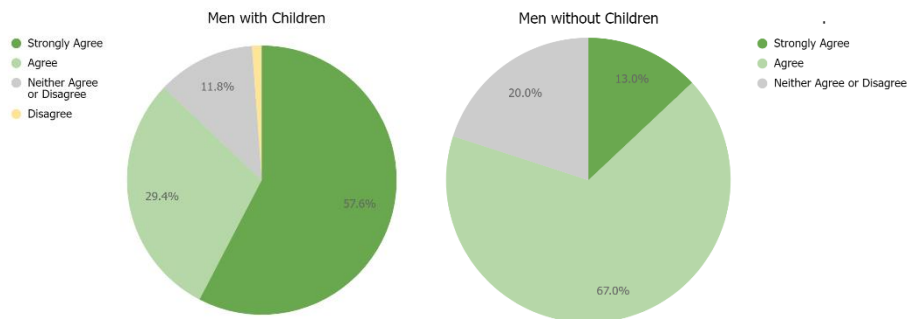


Figure 6. Rating of men's responses to organizational support statements

Lastly, the sixth section looked at respondents' satisfaction with the different leaves policies through the utilization of a 5-point Likert scale. Figure 7 shows mothers' rating of 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied' regarding maternity leave totaled 71.4% of responses. Fathers rating of 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied' regarding paternity leave totaled 88.2%, Figure 8. Finally, ratings of 'very satisfied' and 'satisfied' regarding family leave totaled 61.8% of all respondents, Figure 9.

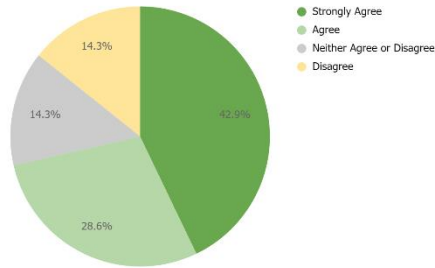


Figure 7. Rating of satisfaction with company's maternity leave policy by mothers

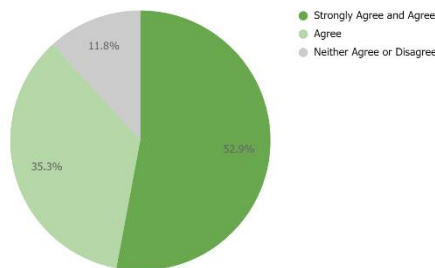


Figure 8. Rating of satisfaction with company's paternity leave policy by fathers

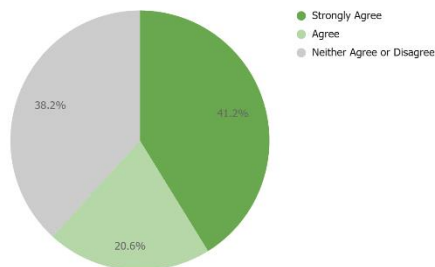


Figure 9. Rating of satisfaction with company's family leave policy by all respondents

Analysis

The rating of respondents' knowledge of parental and family policies indicated that the majority of respondents felt that they knew their company's policy. As expected, respondents with children rated their knowledge of parental and family leave policies even higher. This data indicates that there is still room for improvement regarding respondents building knowledge of their rights. It should be noted

that is question asks respondents to self-identify their knowledge of their leave policy and may not reflect their knowledge and understanding of their companies' actual parental and family leave policies.

When looking at results from the fourth section of questions, regarding having seen peers and/or supervisors take parental for family leave, several interesting analyses can be made. First are the higher rates of seeing peers take leave over supervisors. This can be caused by a multitude of reasons like having generally more peers the supervisors. An additional reason for the lower supervisor rates could be caused by supervisors being older. As it takes time to get promoted and move up through a company, by the time supervisors reach leadership roles, they are aged out of having children. Additionally, the large dichotomy between general "disagree" and "agree" responses to the supervisor maternity leave question is greater than paternal and family leave. This could potentially be explained by the highly visible nature of women leadership in a male dominated industry in combination with the lack of women in leadership generally. These are both areas that require further research.

The key relationship to note regarding the fourth section of questions is 100% of responses that saw a supervisor who has taken leave work at companies who have 100 or more employees. This is significant for several reasons. In addition to potential reasons noted above, small companies may not have the flexibility to cover for a supervisor in case of a leave absence, as there are simply not enough people. A respondent stated in a free response section stated, 'I work for a general contractor and the office staff is small, so it becomes a big deal when someone goes out on leave'. Additionally, the lack of small companies having supervisors take leave highlights an issue around promoting WLB and leave policies. Studies referenced above by Lingard, Kalev and Dobbin indicated how important modeling use of these policies by leadership are to the organizational culture acceptance of these policies. These factors combined indicates that small companies of less than 50 people are at a disadvantage when it comes to use and acceptance of leave policies.

The fifth section of questions pertaining to organizational support looked to gain an understanding of how respondents perceived to what extent their company supported their use of leave. The five statements respondents were asked to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale, were:

- My company is supportive of the possibility I miss work for parental and/or family leave reasons
- I have the support of the supervisor to go on parental and/or family leave
- I have the support of colleagues to go on parental and/or family leave
- There is a positive organizational culture in regard to parental and/or family leave
- I will not experience negative impacts on my career if I go on parent and/or family leave

These statements were modeled after ones used in a 2010 study in Montreal, that looked to assess the perception of parental leave within the male-dominated police force (Tremblay & Genin, 2010). A key finding in the Montreal study is that respondents who have taken leave before have a less positive opinion of organizational support, then those who have yet to take leave. These findings are very similar to what was found in this survey. Especially when looking at the response of female participants, women who did not have children 100% responded "strongly agree" to all statements. Women that did have children, on average, responded "strongly agree" 45.7% of the time to the statements, "agree" 31.4% of the time, "neither agree or disagree" 8.6% of the time, and "disagree" 14.3% of the time. However, men's responses between no children and having children, grew in positive perception. This increase in the positive perception of organizational support by men who have children is opposite of the experience of women respondents, who perceive a loss in organizational support. While all this data relates to individual's perception, these perceptions are influential in decisions made related to job and relationship satisfaction like employee retainment.

This is further supported by the questions in the final section that looked at respondents' satisfaction with their companies leave policies. Women and men with children had very similar response ratios to the question about perception of organizational support and satisfaction with policies. This suggests that perception of these policies have a direct correlation of satisfaction with the policies and thus work satisfaction.

Conclusion

If a company striving to retain employees or attract new talent, creating an environment that promotes Work-Life Balance is important as it improves work and life satisfaction. A key component of creating Work-Life Balance are policies like parental and family leave, especially when these policies are paid leave. The result of this survey starts to explore the relationship between the use and perceptions of leave policies and impacts in construction firms. While this study took place in California, one of 13 states that has paid parental and family leave, the results suggest that there are still individuals who do not feel supported by their company to take advantage of their right to parental and family leave. Additionally, the study suggests that there are individuals who lack understanding of their rights. So, while paid leave is beneficial to Work-Life Balance, this lack of organization support and understanding around leave policies mitigates some of the benefits. This means that HR professionals and upper management should focus on employee understanding leave of rights as well as creating a positive and supportive culture around the use of these leave policies to increase employee satisfaction, and reduce turnover.

Due to the complex nature of the parental and family leave topic, there are a lot of opportunities for future research. An initial opportunity could be to run a study asking the same questions but in a state that does not have paid leave policies. This would create a greater understanding of how impactful the paid aspect of leave policies are to employee satisfaction. Additionally, this study starts to highlight the role that HR professionals and upper management play in the use and acceptance of leave policies. Other than noting the importance of modeling the use of leave policies, study does not address specific methods or tools that HR or upper management can employ to increase policy acceptance.

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