**Gendered Parental Leave Policies among Fortune 500 Companies**

Gayle Kaufman

Davidson College

Richard J. Petts

Ball State University

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**Abstract**

Due to the lack of a federal paid parental leave policy in the United States, access to leave for most US workers is dependent on whether their employer offers paid leave. Our research explores employer-based access to parental leave among Fortune 500 companies. We develop a classification of leave policies based on how policies differ for mothers and fathers: gender equal (equal periods of leave to mothers and fathers), gender modified (equal leave of 6 or more weeks with an additional 6-8 weeks for mothers), gender unequal (mothers offered 2 or more times longer leave than fathers), and gender-neutral gendering (policies that offer primary and secondary caregiver leave). We find that 72% of companies offer some paid parental leave, and the majority of Fortune 500 companies have paid parental leave policies that offer substantially more leave to mothers than to fathers. We also find that technology companies, larger companies, and companies headquartered in a state with paid family leave are more likely to offer paid parental leave. This research provides insight into the degree to which employer policies may contribute to gender inequality and has implications for employer-mediated inequalities in access to parental leave.

**Keywords:** Parental leave, employers, Fortune 500, policy, gender equality

**Gendered Parental Leave Policies among Fortune 500 Companies**

**Introduction**

The US is the only industrialized country without a federal paid parental leave policy. Therefore, workers often rely on employer policies to maintain work-family balance (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). As a result, only 18 percent of workers in private industry have access to paid family leave (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019) – and for those who have access to leave, leave time is limited. According to a survey of US adults who took time off for the birth or adoption of a child, mothers took a median leave of 11 weeks while fathers took a median leave of one week. Not surprisingly, a majority of leave takers say they took less time than they needed or wanted (Horowitz et al., 2017). Despite a high level of support among Americans for access to paid parental leave – 82% think mothers should receive leave, 69% think fathers should receive leave, and most think employers should provide this leave – the number of US employers offering replacement pay for parental leave as well as the average length of parental leave offered by employers did not change notably between 2012 and 2016 (Horowitz et al., 2017; Matos, Galinsky, & Bond, 2017).

For those interested in gender equality at work and home, many argue that increasing men’s involvement in domestic labor is essential for achieving such equality (Coltrane, 2000; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). Parental leave policies, in particular, have the potential to have an immediate effect on fathers’ involvement in childcare, helping to reduce the burdens often placed primarily on mothers (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). When fathers take parental leave they are more likely to share childcare (Evertsson, Boye, & Erman, 2018; Petts & Knoester, 2018; Pragg & Knoester, 2017), their children have better outcomes (Cools, Fiva, & Kirkeboen, 2015; Huerta et al., 2014), and their partners do better in the labor market (Andersen, 2018; Evertsson & Duvander, 2011). Patnaik (2019) argues that paternity leave offers a “win-win” by increasing investment in children and gender equality. While we focus on policy and not practice, recent evidence suggests that implementing more generous company leave policies can greatly increase the number of men who take parental leave and the amount of time they take (Goodman et al., 2019). And, evidence outside the US shows that the implementation of supportive paid parental leave policies can often contribute to greater gender equality (Collins, 2019; Kaufman, 2020).

Despite calls from business and HR professionals for companies to adopt gender-equal parental leave policies as a way of promoting gender equality (e.g., Miller, 2019), there is little academic research about US employers’ efforts to promote gender equality through parental leave policies (Farrelly & Whitehouse, 2013). Additionally, there is little research that focuses on men’s access to parental leave in the US (Haas & Hwang, 2019). Thus, more work is needed to understand parental leave policies among US employers. We therefore ask: what kinds of parental leave policies do top US companies offer, and does policy type differ by company characteristics? We first introduce a typology to assess the degree to which parental leave policies may promote, or reduce, gender equality. We apply this typology to Fortune 500 companies to categorize and describe parental leave polices, focusing on the prevalence of these policies, whether policies are aimed solely or mainly at mothers or treat mothers and fathers equally, and how length of leave offered to mothers and fathers varies by policy type. We then examine the associations between characteristics of Fortune 500 companies (number of employees, industry, and being headquartered in a state with paid family leave) and having a paid parental leave policy as well as type of policy.

This study provides two key contributions. First, this study is the first to systematically compare parental leave policies of top US companies. Media stories often highlight new expansive policies among a few select companies (McGregor, 2019; PL+US, 2018), but it is unclear how common such policies are, particularly because this information is juxtaposed with evidence that most Americans lack access to paid parental leave. By systematically comparing policies of Fortune 500 companies, this study offers concrete data on companies that are seen as leaders not only in business but in employer policies (Davison & Rouse, 2005). Second, this study develops a typology to better understand and classify employer parental leave policies. This is crucial in the US context, where most workers either do not have leave or rely on their employers for access to leave. Consequently, employers may largely set expectations about who should, and who should not, have access to leave. As such, they can implement policies that work toward achieving greater gender equality, or policies that may further entrench gender stereotypes of women as primary caregivers and men as primary breadwinners. This study, therefore, assesses the degree to which parental leave policies among top US companies may help to promote egalitarianism and employee work-life balance, or contribute to existing gender inequalities.

**Parental leave policies in the US**

In the US, the only national policy involving parental leave is the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allows new parents who meet eligibility requirements to take up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave. Estimates suggest that only approximately 60% of workers meet eligibility requirements for FMLA, and take-up rates for parental leave are fairly low (Klerman, Daley, & Pozniak, 2014). Over the last decade, there has been increased interest in statutory paid parental leave policies at the state-level. Currently eight states and Washington, DC have passed paid family leave legislation, three of which will be fully implemented in the next few years (NPWF, 2019a). But these states only account for 28% of the US population, leaving most Americans without access to government-sponsored paid family leave.

Given the lack of access to statutory paid leave policies, most Americans rely on their employers to provide paid parental leave. However, national estimates suggest that access to paid parental leave from employers is uncommon, with only 18 percent of workers in private industry having access to paid family leave (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Surveys of employers further illustrate the limited access to paid leave for all workers, and for fathers in particular. For example, a recent WorldatWork (2017) survey finds that 38% of companies offer paid parental leave to at least some employees. A second nationally representative survey finds that 33% of companies offer paid leave to mothers but only 17% offer paid leave to fathers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017). Similarly, of the companies that offer leave to employees, 58% offer at least partial pay to mothers but only 15% offer at least partial pay to fathers (Matos et al., 2017). These surveys illustrate two key trends – (1) most employers do not provide paid time off to new parents and (2) fathers are especially unlikely to have access to paid parental leave. Despite these insights, these surveys lack detail on the various ways in which parental leave policies are structured and the degree to which paid parental leave policies may be gendered.

Systematic detailed reports on employers’ paid parental leave policies are limited. PL+US (a paid family leave advocacy group) releases an annual employer scorecard, ranking paid family leave policies among “70 of the largest employers in the US” (PL+US, 2018). Additionally, the National Partnership for Women and Families recently reported details on new (or expanded) paid parental leave programs among US companies (NPFW, 2018). These reports provide insight into what paid parental leave policies look like within companies and the degree to which access to, and time offered by, leave policies vary for men and women. However, it is unclear how representative these companies are of employers overall, or even within subgroups of US employers. Thus, we build on this work to analyze paid parental leave policies using a well-known list of US companies with the highest revenues – the Fortune 500. Because Fortune 500 companies are industry leaders, they likely set the standards that other companies follow (Davison & Rouse, 2005). As such, these companies may also be highly influential in either setting the standards to work toward gender equality, or reinforcing existing stereotypes about men’s and women’s roles. These companies also have a lot of resources, and thus may be better able to implement paid parental leave policies, and may have more incentive to do so as they compete to recruit and retain the most talented workers within their respective industries (Stroman et al., 2017). Thus, systematically focusing on these top US companies provides insight into the progress (or lack thereof) that is being made in working toward greater gender equality and work-family balance for workers.

**Gendered organizations, gendered policies**

Gender is an integral part of workplace organizations. While organizational logic suggests that workplaces and jobs are gender-neutral, gender is an implicit part of these structures and assumptions about women result in gendered hierarchies where men are privileged and women are disadvantaged (Acker, 1990). One pervasive gendered concept is that of the ideal worker. The ideal worker is a worker who has no other obligations and thus can devote themselves to their work (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams, 2000). Workplace organizations are often centered around the ideal worker norm, which works to reinforce gendered hierarchies within the workplace (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2003). That is, it is often assumed that men will keep their focus on work (as it is assumed that they have a female partner to take care of domestic tasks) while women will be distracted by domestic responsibilities and thus cannot fully achieve the status of an ideal worker (Davies & Frink, 2014). Work organizations continue to rely heavily on these gendered norms to make decisions about hiring and promotions (Haas & Hwang, 2019).

In addition, gendered assumptions often work their way into family-friendly policies, including parental leave. As Thébaud and Halcomb (2019, p. 2) argue, “workplace norms and policies often remain rooted in old-fashioned assumptions about gender.” Many of these assumptions are related to traditional expectations surrounding maternal versus paternal roles – that mothers should be primarily responsible for childcare whereas fathers should be primarily responsible for breadwinning. As a result, company leave policies are often designed and geared more toward women than men (Brandth & Kvande, 2016; Burnett et al., 2013; Meil, Romero-Balsas, & Castrillo-Bustamante, 2019), likely because employers generally see male employees as simply employees and not fathers (Kaufman, 2013; Özbilgin et al., 2011). This is reflected in the greater availability of paid parental leave for mothers compared to fathers within US companies (Barcus, Tigges, & Kim, 2019; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017; Matos et al., 2017). Even parental leave policies marketed as “gender-neutral” rely on gendered assumptions as the employee must vouch that they are the primary caregiver (Rau & Williams, 2017), which eliminates the possibility of equal parenting. In contrast, parental leave policies that provide time off specifically for fathers may work to legitimize men’s family roles and their use of family-friendly policies (Haas & Hwang, 2019).

**Gendered parental leave policy ideal types**

Because of the gendered nature of parental leave policies, it is useful to consider classification schemes that help to organize and understand these gendered variations. One illustration of such a scheme is the four ideal types of parental leave developed by Ciccia and Verloo (2012). The *male breadwinner model* provides women with time for parental leave that is not well paid, thus encouraging women to stay home while men work. The *caregiver parity model* provides women with time for parental leave that is well compensated, thus rewarding the caregiver role but maintaining a gendered division of labor. The *universal breadwinner model* provides limited time or remittance for parental leave, thus encouraging all parents to continue employment and assumes childcare is outsourced. The *universal caregiver model* provides both women and men well-paid parental leave, which encourages gender equality in the domestic sphere as well as the labor force. In other words, concentrating rights to parental leave among women perpetuates gender inequality by reinforcing a traditional division of labor and/or promoting women’s employment without also promoting men’s care work.

This scheme was designed to classify countries based on their policies. The US exemplifies a universal breadwinner model, in which paid work is emphasized and rewarded for both men and women (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Gornick & Meyers, 2008). Moreover, family is considered a private institution in the US, and as such families are expected to seek individual solutions to balance paid employment and unpaid domestic work (Sainsbury, 1999). Similarly, gender equality in the labor market is much more emphasized than gender equality in domestic labor, which ultimately impacts gender equality at work. Gornick and Meyers (2008) find that women and men share similar work trajectories until they become parents at which time their “working lives begin to diverge most radically” (p. 315).

While this classification scheme is useful for understanding the US as a whole, there is likely significant variation in policies *within* the US given the reliance on employer-based policies. For example, some companies may offer gender neutral policies that reflect the emphasis on paid work for both men and women as well as the model put forth by FMLA (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Gornick & Meyers, 2008; Klerman et al., 2014). Other companies may have policies that offer significantly longer leaves to women than men, reflecting embedded norms of gender traditionalism within these organizations (Barcus et al., 2019; Meil et al., 2019). Yet other companies may offer something in between, reflecting competing norms of egalitarianism and traditional gender attitudes that exist (Scarborough, Sin, & Risman, 2019; Thébaud & Halcomb, 2019).

Given these possible variations in company policies, we develop a classification scheme that identifies six ideal types of company parental leave policies. *Gender equal* policies are policies that provide equal parental leave to all employees with no mention of maternity/paternity leave (or policies that provide equal periods of leave to mothers and fathers specifically). These policies most directly have the potential to support equal involvement of fathers and mothers in caregiving, consistent with the universal caregiver model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). *Gender modified* policies are those that provide equal parental leave to both parents of at least 6 weeks plus an additional 6-8 weeks of leave provided to birth mothers (often in the form of temporary disability or maternity leave). These policies also support shared caregiving while acknowledging the additional need for the physical recovery of birth mothers. Again, such policies would be largely consistent with the universal caregiver model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). The next two types reflect the embeddedness of gender in organizations: *gender unequal low* policies are those that provide two or more times the amount of paid leave to mothers as compared to fathers (or other parents), but the difference in amount of leave offered between mothers and fathers is 8 weeks or less, and *gender unequal high* policies are those that provide two or more times the amount of paid leave to mothers as compared to fathers (or other parents), and the difference in amount of leave offered between mothers and fathers is greater than 8 weeks. The 8-week cutoff between gender unequal low and high policies is consistent with anti-discrimination protections for mothers allowing them to receive 6-8 weeks of leave for physical recovery from pregnancy/childbirth; beyond this period, disparities between mothers and fathers may constitute discrimination (EEOC, 2015; Widiss, 2020). Both versions of gender unequal policies are consistent with the caregiver parity model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). The fifth ideal type is *gender neutral gendering*. These policies are those that offer primary and secondary caregiver leave. It is possible that these policies operate in a gender-neutral way, similar to *gender equal* policies. However, the labels of primary/secondary caregiver often reinforce the norms of mothers as primary and fathers as secondary caregivers, leading these policies to look similar to gender unequal policies and be consistent with the caregiver parity model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). The final ideal policy type is *none*, whichindicates companies that do not provide paid parental leave to their employees. These companies would be consistent with the universal breadwinner model (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012). The full typology of paid parental leave policies is presented in Table 1.

---------- Insert Table 1 About Here ----------

**Company characteristics, public policy context, and policy type**

In addition to understanding the gendered nature of company paid parental leave policies, it is also important to consider factors that may be influential in shaping these policies, such as organizational factors and policy context. The business case for work-family policies suggests that organizations consider how policies will benefit their business (Adame-Sánchez, González-Cruz, & Martínez-Fuentes, 2016; den Dulk et al., 2010). These benefits may vary by industry, company size, and public policy context.[[1]](#footnote-1) Industry sector may influence whether an employer adopts work-family policies (Gregory & Milner, 2009). Many US companies that offer parental leave policies are located in the technology industry, as this sector is particularly competitive in offering extensive employee benefits packages to recruit talented employees (Henry, 2016; Thébaud & Halcomb, 2019). Technology companies are also more likely than other companies to offer domestic partnership benefits (Davison & Rouse, 2005). Thus, Fortune 500 companies in the technology industry may be especially likely to offer paid parental leave. We therefore hypothesize:

H1: Companies in the technology industry will be more likely to have a paid parental leave policy than companies in other industries.

Among companies that offer parental leave, the type of policy offered may also vary by industry sector. For example, the technology industry is highly gendered and male-dominated, similar to the industrial and materials industries (IWPR, 2018; Ko, Kotrba, & Roebuck, 2015). Such companies may promote and reinforce traditional gender ideals (Reid, O’Neill, & Blair-Loy, 2018), and thus may be more likely to adopt gender unequal policies. In contrast, industries such as health care are less male-dominated and thus may have policies that are more egalitarian (IWPR, 2018; Ko et al., 2015). As such, parental leave policies may reflect the gendered nature of the company’s industry. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: Among companies with paid parental leave policies, companies in less male-dominated industries (e.g., healthcare) will be more likely to have gender equal policies than companies in male-dominated industries (technology, industrial, and materials).

Additionally, company size may influence parental leave policies. Larger companies generally offer more benefits (MacDermid, Litchfield, & Pitt-Catsouphes, 1999) and have smaller gender wage gaps than smaller companies (Bertrand & Hallock, 2001). Some studies find that larger employers are more likely to offer family-friendly policies (den Dulk et al., 2010), but other work finds no consistent relationship (Farrelly & Whitehouse, 2013). Regardless, larger companies likely have more resources that enable them to provide more expansive benefits packages such as paid parental leave. Smaller wage gaps in larger companies may also suggest that these companies may also be more likely to adopt gender equal policies. Thus, we hypothesize that:

 H3: Larger companies will be more likely to have a paid parental leave policy than smaller companies.

H4: Larger companies will be more likely to have gender equal policies than smaller companies.

In addition to organizational factors, a public policy context that promotes gender equality may also influence employers to adopt work-family policies (Gregory & Milner, 2009). When governments implement statutory policies, this may encourage organizations to adopt their own policies or potentially discourage company response as they see these issues as government’s responsibility rather than their own (Williamson, 2012). For example, Thams et al. (2018) find that companies employ more female directors when headquartered in states that ban gender discrimination in hiring. Yet, den Dulk et al. (2010) find a negative relationship between public work-family provisions and employer involvement in childcare and leave arrangements. Even so, evidence suggests that companies have largely benefited, and been supportive of, state paid family leave laws once implemented (NPWF, 2019b). As such, being in a state with a paid family leave policy may shift the culture such that companies are more supportive of adopting leave policies that benefit all workers. We hypothesize that:

H5: Companies headquartered in states that offer paid family leave will be more likely to have a paid parental leave policy than companies headquartered in other states.

H6: Companies headquartered in states that offer paid family leave will be more likely to have gender equal parental leave policies than companies headquartered in other states.

**Data and methods**

*Data*

The Fortune 500 is a well-known list, compiled by Forbes magazine, of the top companies in the US based on revenues in a given fiscal year[[2]](#footnote-2). The Fortune 500 list from 2018 is used for this study (<https://fortune.com/fortune500/2018/>), as this was the most recent list available when data collection began.[[3]](#footnote-3) We used a variety of methods to obtain detailed information about whether each company offered paid parental leave to its employees, and the details of these policies (if applicable). We first visited each company’s website to see whether their website detailed any parental leave policy (which was typically located on a “benefits” page if it was listed at all). At the same time, we conducted internet searches on each company using the company’s name along with keywords such as “parental leave”, “maternity leave”, “paternity leave”, “family leave”, and “employee benefits.” For some companies, these searches led us to find news articles from reputable sources (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Washington Post, Forbes*) or lists of parental leave policies compiled from other organizations (National Partnership for Women and Families, PL+US) describing the details of parental leave policies. We only used information on company policies from the internet if it came from the company’s website or from a reliable news source; we did not consider details of leave policies from crowdsourced sites (e.g., glassdoor.com, fairygodboss.com).[[4]](#footnote-4)

 If we were unable to obtain information about company parental leave policies online (or if the information online was unclear), we contacted each company directly. We attempted to contact companies via telephone and email (or both), and repeated attempts were made to contact each company in cases where our calls and/or emails were not answered or returned (all companies were contacted at least twice). In total, we were able to obtain information on policies from, or communicate with, 389 of the Fortune 500 companies (78%); 111 companies did not respond to our phone calls and emails. However, 36 of the companies refused to provide any information about their parental leave policies. Thus, our final sample focuses on parental leave policies at 353 of the 2018 Fortune 500 companies (71%).

*Gendered employer policies*

Our main focus is on the degree to which paid parental leave policies at US companies are gendered. To do this, we first compiled information on whether each company offered paid parental leave to its employees. For companies that do offer paid parental leave, we then considered how much leave employees are provided and who leave was provided to. Length of leave was categorized separately for parents (i.e., leave that was provided for either/both parents equitably – this often includes adoptive parents), mothers (i.e., leave reserved specifically for birth mothers including paid time off under temporary disability insurance), and fathers (i.e., leave reserved specifically for fathers). Some companies also provided parental leave based on whether the employee was a primary or secondary caregiver. Length of leave for primary and secondary caregivers was categorized separately.

We then classified companies into one of six categories based on how much leave is offered and who is eligible to receive this leave: *gender equal* (all employees have access to the same amount of leave), *gender modified* (both parents receive at least 6 weeks of parental leave plus birth mothers receive an additional 6-8 weeks of leave, sometimes in the form of temporary disability or maternity leave), *gender unequal low* (mothers receive two or more times the amount of paid leave as fathers/other parents, but the difference in amount of leave offered to mothers versus fathers is 8 weeks or less), *gender unequal high* (mothers receive two or more times the amount of paid leave as fathers/other parents, and the difference in amount of leave offered to mothers versus fathers is greater than 8 weeks), *gender neutral gendering* (parents receive different amounts of leave based on whether they are considered a primary or secondary caregiver, with mothers often specifically labeled as primary caregivers), and *none* (parents do not receive paid parental leave).

*Company characteristics and public policy context*

We also considered whether company size, industry, and being headquartered in a state with a paid family leave policy are associated with having a paid parental leave policy (and type of policy). This information was taken from the Fortune 500 report. First, we include *number of employees* for each company, measured as thousands of employees.[[5]](#footnote-5) Second, we included a dichotomous indicator for whether each company was *headquartered in a state with a paid family leave policy*. In 2018, four states – California, New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island – had state-level paid family leave policies (Kaufman, 2020). Companies that were headquartered in one of these states were coded as 1 (companies headquartered in one of the other 46 states were coded as 0). Finally, we include indicators of industry sector for each company. We coded companies into one of eight industry sectors: *technology* (used as reference category), *communication, consumer, energy, health care, industrial, financial,* and *materials*.

*Analytic strategy*

We first provide a descriptive overview of paid parental leave policies among Fortune 500 companies, focusing on the degree to which these policies are gendered and average length of leave offered. We then use logistic regression models to consider whether the probability of offering paid parental leave varies by company size, industry, and being headquartered in a state offering paid family leave. Finally, we consider whether these factors are associated with the type of policy offered, using multinomial logistic regression models to compare the likelihood of adopting a gender modified, gender unequal, or gender neutral gendering policy versus a gender equal policy (this model is restricted to companies that have a paid parental leave policy). For all regression models, robust standard errors are used to account for the clustering of company headquarters within US states.

**Results**

Summary statistics for all variables are included in Table 2. Of the 353 companies we have full data on, 72% (*N* = 254) have a paid parental leave policy for employees. An additional 24 companies verified that they provide some form of paid parental leave (either stated on their website or confirmed via phone/email) but refused to provide details about this policy. Taking these companies into account, 74% of Fortune 500 companies (278 out of 377) provide some form of paid parental leave to employees. Thus, in contrast to numerous studies showing that access to company-based paid parental leave is relatively rare in the US, paid parental leave policies are quite common among the highest revenue companies.

---------- Insert Table 2 About Here ----------

 Table 2 also shows the degree to which paid parental leave policies among Fortune 500 companies are gendered. Not surprisingly, most companies offer longer parental leaves to mothers. The most common policy is gender unequal low (25% of all companies), where mothers are given two or more times the amount of leave as fathers, but the difference between mothers’ and fathers’ leave periods is 8 weeks or less. Additionally, 10% of all companies are classified as having gender unequal high policies. Taken together, 35% of all companies – approximately half of all companies that offer paid parental leave (49%) – offer at least twice as much paid leave to mothers than to fathers. In contrast, only 17% of companies (24% of companies that have a paid parental leave policy) offer equal leave for mothers and fathers. Other policy classifications are less common; 12% of companies (16% of companies that have a leave policy) have gender modified policies,[[6]](#footnote-6) and only 8% of all companies (11% of companies that offer paid leave) have policies for primary and secondary caregivers.

 Additionally, results in Table 2 show summary statistics for company characteristics and public policy context. 29% of companies in this sample are headquartered in a state that has a paid family leave policy, and additional analyses (not shown) suggest that companies in these states are more likely to have a paid parental leave policy (82%) compared to companies in states without statutory paid family leave (68%; *p* < .01). There is also some evidence suggesting that the availability of paid parental leave varies by industry sector; descriptive analyses (not shown) show that paid parental leave policies are most prevalent in the technology (91%), communication (78%), and financial (78%) sectors, and least prevalent in the materials (53%), industrial (61%), and energy (65%) sectors.

 The prevalence of gender unequal and gender modified leave policies suggests that most Fortune 500 company leave policies are gendered. An assessment of the type of parent(s) specified in these policies further illustrates this trend. Table 3 provides a description of the degree to which policies are geared towards mothers, fathers, parents, or some combination of the three. As shown in Table 3, mothers are specified in 74% of leave policies and are the only employees eligible for paid parental leave in 11% of companies that offer leave. In contrast, only 12% of policies mention fathers specifically, and all of these policies also specifically provide paid leave to mothers. Surprisingly, there are also a small number of companies that provide different lengths of paid leave to mothers, fathers, and adoptive parents, and adoptive parents are provided with longer paid leaves than fathers in all but one instance (these policies are all classified as gender unequal[[7]](#footnote-7)). These policies provide additional evidence that companies may view fathers’ parenting as secondary and thus fathers do not need as much paid parental leave as mothers or adoptive [women] parents.

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To further assess the extent to which company policies may be gendered, we calculated the mean length of leave (in weeks) offered by companies within each policy classification. Results are illustrated in Figure 1. Overall, mothers on average receive 10 weeks of leave from Fortune 500 companies with leave policies, with average lengths of leave being the highest for mothers within gender modified (16 weeks), gender unequal high (16 weeks), and gender neutral gendering (13 weeks) policies. Interestingly, mothers receive the least amount of leave, on average, in companies that have gender equal policies (all but gender modified are significantly different from gender equal at *p* < .001). In contrast, fathers receive less than 5 weeks of leave, on average, in companies that offer paid leave, and receive the longest average leaves in companies classified as gender equal (8 weeks) and gender modified (9 weeks). Indeed, leave lengths are significantly longer for fathers in companies classified as gender equal than companies with gender unequal or gender neutral gendering policies (all differences significant at *p* < .01).

---------- Insert Figure 1 About Here ----------

Results in Figure 1 also show the wide disparities in leave length between mothers and fathers for all types of policies other than gender equal. Specifically, mothers receive over 3 times the amount of leave than fathers under gender unequal high policies, over 4 times the amount of leave than fathers under gender unequal low policies, and 4.5 times the amount of leave than fathers under gender neutral gendering policies (assuming that mothers are primary caregivers). These results highlight the gendered disparity in time offered to mothers and fathers, and how these disparities are amplified in companies with more gendered parental leave policies (all differences between mothers and fathers reported here are statistically significant at *p* < .001).[[8]](#footnote-8)

---------- Insert Table 4 About Here ----------

 Turning to our regression models, we first consider whether the probability of having a paid parental leave policy is associated with company size, being headquartered in a state with a paid family leave policy, and industry sector. As shown in Table 4, results largely support our hypotheses. First, consistent with Hypothesis 1, we find that technology companies are especially likely to offer paid parental leave to employees. The odds of having a paid parental leave policy are higher in technology companies compared to consumer (OR = .23 *p* < .01), energy (OR = .29, *p* < .05), financial (OR = .43, *p* < .10), health care (OR = .23, *p* < .05), industrial (OR = .17, *p* < .001), or materials companies (OR = .17, *p* < .05).Additionally, consistent with Hypothesis 3, Fortune 500 companies with more employees have greater odds of having a paid parental leave policy (OR = 1.01*, p* < .05). Additionally, in support of Hypothesis 5, being headquartered in a state that has a paid family leave policy increases the odds of having a company paid parental leave policy by 70% (OR = 1.70, *p* < .05).

 Results examining whether company characteristics and policy context are associated with type of parental leave policy are presented in Table 5. Overall, we find only limited support for our hypotheses. Hypothesis 2 suggested that among companies with paid parental leave policies, less male-dominated industries would be more likely to adopt gender equal policies compared to male-dominated industries. In limited support of this hypothesis, we find that health care companies are less likely to adopt gender unequal high policies than gender equal policies (*rrr* = 0.22, *p* < .05). Given that health care is a female-dominated industry, this provides some evidence that the makeup of employees within companies may play a role in the type of policies that companies adopt. However, small cell sizes limit our ability to draw full conclusions regarding the association between industry and type of paid parental leave policy (e.g., the highly significant effect of health care and materials industries in the gender neutral gendering column is due to small cell sizes). We do not find support for Hypothesis 4; although larger companies were more likely to adopt paid parental leave policies, we largely do not find any association between company size and policy type. Finally, in regard to Hypothesis 6, we find that being headquartered in a state with a paid family leave policy is associated with an increased likelihood of adopting a gender neutral gendering policy compared to a gender equal policy.

**Discussion**

This paper sought to provide a systematic examination of parental leave policies among Fortune 500 companies, with particular attention to gender differences in these policies. We find that 72% of the highest revenue companies in the US offer some form of paid parental leave. To analyze these policies, we developed a policy classification scheme that categorizes these policies based on the degree to which they are gendered. While 17% of all companies provide the same amount of paid parental leave to all parents (classified as gender equal), most companies (55% of all companies; 76% of companies that provide paid parental leave) reinforce existing gendered stereotypes that assume mothers will serve as primary caregivers and thus are given access to longer periods of paid leave. Approximately one-third of companies (12% of companies labeled as gender modified and 25% of companies labeled as gender unequal low) reinforce gender biases through physical recovery time for mothers. These policies provide longer periods of leave to mothers, but the additional leave complies with laws that allow an additional 6-8 weeks to birth mothers to recover from childbirth. An additional 10% of company policies provide substantially longer periods of leave to mothers than fathers (gender unequal high). These policies are clearly gender biased, are likely legally non-compliant, and would potentially be at risk of a discrimination lawsuit (EEOC, 2015; Widiss, 2020). Finally, eight percent of companies reinforce gender stereotypes implicitly (labeled as gender neutral gendering). While these policies mainly avoid the use of gendered language by referring to primary and secondary caregivers, there are often other indicators that suggest primary caregivers are mothers while secondary caregivers are fathers (Kaufman, 2020; Rau & Williams, 2017). Additionally, fathers often have to “prove” they are the primary caregiver whereas this is assumed for mothers. Overall, we see that companies largely view fathers as secondary parents who need less time to care for their new children.

 This classification scheme is helpful in illustrating the degree to which parental leave policies among Fortune 500 companies are largely gendered. Mothers receive the most parental leave in companies that have gender modified and gender unequal policies. These policies are similar to those classified as caregiver parity by Ciccia and Verloo (2012) and may have deleterious results for both women and men. Employers may assume that mothers will prioritize caregiving, resulting in workplace penalties for employed mothers (Budig & England, 2001), while fathers who request parental leave may face a flexibility stigma or feel unseen (Burnett et al., 2013; Coltrane et al., 2013; Harvey & Tremblay, 2018). While such policies may have been created in an attempt to acknowledge and increase opportunities for women and mothers to balance work-family life, policies that provide more leave to mothers than fathers signal that women employees are different, which ultimately impedes gender equality in hiring and promotions (Kaufman, 2020). Achieving gender equality in the workplace is unlikely without offering similar opportunities to fathers. To that end, fathers receive the most parental leave in companies that have policies that allow fathers to take similar periods of parental leave as mothers (gender equal and gender modified policies, although gender modified policies also extend mothers’ time for physical recovery). Policies that provide similar amounts of well-paid parental leave for both parents better promote gender equality at work and home (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Kaufman, 2020). Nevertheless, given that current gender equal policies in Fortune 500 companies tend to provide lower levels of leave for mothers compared to other types of paid parental leave policies, we suggest employers increase leave for fathers rather than decreasing leave for mothers to achieve this outcome.

We then examined the association between company characteristics, public policy context, and employer parental leave policies. Consistent with our first hypothesis, companies in the technology industry are significantly more likely to have a paid parental leave policy than companies in other industries. Technology companies tend to offer more work-family benefits than other companies (Davison & Rouse, 2005), often as a way to maintain competitiveness and recruit highly qualified employees (Thébaud & Halcomb, 2019). However, we find only limited support for our second hypothesis that companies in less male-dominated industries will be more likely to have gender equal policies than companies in male-dominated industries. Although we find that health care companies are more likely to adopt gender equal policies than gender unequal policies, our sample size limits the conclusions we can draw regarding industry sector and type of paid parental leave policy. Future research should apply this classification scheme to a larger sample of companies to fully assess the degree to which policies are gendered across industry sector. Consistent with our third hypothesis, company size is positively associated with having a paid parental leave policy. In general, larger companies offer more benefits (MacDermid et al., 1999) and this is particularly the case for family-friendly benefits such as parental leave (den Dulk et al., 2010). However, we do not find any evidence that company size is associated with policy type.

Consistent with our fifth hypothesis, companies with headquarters in states that offer paid family leave are more likely to have paid parental leave policies themselves compared to companies with headquarters in other states. This suggests that a supportive public policy context may encourage employers to adopt their own policies (Gregory & Milner, 2009; Williamson, 2012). On the other hand, and in opposition to our sixth hypothesis, companies with headquarters in states with paid family leave are more likely to have gender neutral gendering policies than companies in other states. This is a puzzling finding. It could be that companies headquartered in states with paid family leave want to extend periods of leave for mothers with the idea that this will increase opportunities for women, but they are careful to also be consistent with state paid family leave policies that offer equal individual entitlements to both mothers and fathers.[[9]](#footnote-9) By adopting gender neutral gendering policies, they are able to respond to institutional pressures in a way that is deemed appropriate (den Dulk et al., 2010) and maintain the appearance of a gender neutral policy, even though these policies tend to be highly gendered. However, this theory is highly speculative, and future research should further examine how policy contexts shape companies’ decisions about paid parental leave policies.

Although this study is the first to systematically examine paid parental leave policies among top companies, there are some limitations to acknowledge. First, while we made every attempt to collect information from all 500 companies, we do not have detailed data on 29% of Fortune 500 companies. Given the high rate of companies that have paid parental leave policies in these data, it is possible (or perhaps even likely) that many of the companies that did not respond do not offer paid parental leave. Indeed, family-friendly organizations are more likely to participate in research related to work-family policies (Pettigrew & Duncan, 2017). However, even if all of the nonresponding companies do not offer paid parental leave, we would still conclude that the majority of Fortune 500 companies offer paid parental leave (254/500 = 51%). Nonresponse also varied by ranking on the list; 12% of the top 200 companies did not respond compared to 45% of the bottom 200 companies.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, this study likely provides an overestimate of paid parental leave among Fortune 500 companies that disproportionately reflects the very top companies. It is also important to acknowledge that because we focus on Fortune 500 companies, these findings are not representative of all US companies.

Second, for analyses involving companies with gender neutral gendering policies, we assumed that mothers were the primary caregivers. Given the gender neutrality of these policies, it is possible for fathers to be primary caregivers and receive longer leaves. However, it is often more difficult for fathers to prove they are the primary caregiver and the assumption is often that mothers perform this role (Rau & Williams, 2017). Additionally, there are some companies that have varying leave policies for different types of workers (e.g., salaried vs. hourly, full-time vs. part-time). When these distinctions were specified, we focused on the most generous leave policy within each company. As such, these results likely only apply to full-time, salaried employees in top companies.

Finally, we would have liked to include additional contextual factors to better understand variations between companies with different types of leave policies. For example, given variations between male- and female-dominated industries (IWPR, 2018; Ko et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2018), we are interested in whether company policies vary by employee diversity within companies (e.g., % women employees, % women managers). Unfortunately, the vast majority of Fortune 500 companies do not disclose information on gender of employees (Donnelly, 2017). We do have information on whether companies have a woman CEO, but this cannot be considered in analyses given the small sample size (only 24 Fortune 500 companies had a woman CEO in 2018). Future research should continue to explore the broader contextual factors that may contribute to company paid parental leave policies. Future studies should also more closely examine the way in which these policies are presented to the public and to employees, and whether the discourse used in promoting leave policies is gendered.

Our research has clear implications for understanding the current structure of paid parental leave in the US. Our results show that most top companies in the US provide paid parental leave to employees. While government mandates may be the most effective way to ensure accessibility to paid parental leave, workplaces may take initiative and play an active role in providing these benefits even when they are not compelled to do so (den Dulk et al., 2010). Employers are not likely to adopt paid parental leave polices unless they perceive such a policy would benefit their organization. Therefore, showing a firm there are market-based benefits to a policy may increase their implementation of that policy (Adame-Sánchez et al., 2016). There is indeed a strong business case for paid parental leave policies (Harrington, McHugh, & Fraone, 2019; Stroman et al., 2017), and Fortune 500 companies are likely at the forefront of realizing these benefits and implementing paid parental leave policies.

However, although most Fortune 500 companies have adopted paid parental leave policies, most policies seem to reflect the gendered nature of workplace organizations and largely reinforce gender stereotypes. This finding provides important insight into the degree to which current employer-based parental leave policies may actually work toward promoting gender equality. Parental leave policies do more than provide parents an opportunity to care for their children. These regulations also “create norms about good motherhood and good fatherhood” (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, 510). Better leave policies have the potential to increase men’s time in domestic work and childcare (Patnaik, 2019) and promote gender equality at work and home (Kaufman, 2020). Policies clearly labeled for fathers may be most effective in encouraging men’s use of parental leave (Patnaik, 2019; Reimer, 2019). Fathers who take longer leaves are more engaged in both caretaking and developmental activities (Petts & Knoester, 2018) and provide more relationship support to their partners and better coparenting quality than those who do not take leave (Petts & Knoester, 2020). Thus, it is important for employers to not just consider the business benefits of paid parental leave, but also the degree to which these policies may benefit all workers within companies. We therefore encourage all employers to adopt gender equal parental leave policies.

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**Table 1.** Gendered Employer Paid Parental Leave Policy Typology

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Description | Observed Weeks of Leave for Mothers (or Primary Caregivers) | Observed Weeks of Leave for Fathers (or Secondary Caregivers) | Difference between Mothers and Fathers |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Gender Equal | Companies that provide equal periods of paid leave to mothers and fathers | 1 - 52 | 1 - 52 | 0 |
| Gender Modified | Companies that provide at least 6 weeks of paid leave to both parents plus additional 6-8 weeks to mothers\* | 10 - 28 | 6 - 20 | 6 – 8 |
| Gender Unequal Low | Companies that provide two or more times the amount of paid leave to mothers than fathers, and difference in leave offered between mothers and fathers is 8 weeks or less | 2 - 12 | 0 - 4 | 8 or less |
| Gender Unequal High | Companies that provide two or more times the amount of paid leave to mothers than fathers, and difference in leave offered between mothers and fathers is more than 8 weeks | 10 - 26 | 0 - 12 | 9 or more |
| Gender Neutral Gendering | Companies that offer paid leave to primary and secondary caregivers | 2 - 26 | 0 - 12 | 2 – 24 |
| None | Companies that provide no paid leave to mothers or fathers | 0 | 0 | 0 |
|  |  |  |  |  |

\*There are three companies classified as *gender modified* that do not exactly meet these criteria. One provides 10 weeks leave for mothers

and 6 weeks to fathers (a gap of 4 weeks instead of 6-8). Two companies provide 22 weeks to mothers and 12 to fathers (a gap of 10 weeks).

**Table 2.** Summary Statistics

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
| Variables | *M* (*SD*)*or %* (*n*) | Min | Max |
| *Policy Classification* |  |  |  |
|  Gender Equal | 17% (60) | 0 | 1 |
|  Gender Modified High | 12% (42) | 0 | 1 |
|  Gender Unequal Low | 25% (88) | 0 | 1 |
|  Gender Unequal High | 10% (35) | 0 | 1 |
|  Gender Neutral Gendering | 8% (28) | 0 | 1 |
|  None | 28% (99) | 0 | 1 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Number of Employees (thousands) | 70.24 (146.50) | 1.18 | 2300 |
| HQ in State with Leave | 29% (101) | 0 | 1 |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Industry* |  |  |  |
|  Financial | 24% (83) | 0 | 1 |
|  Communication | 4% (15) | 0 | 1 |
|  Consumer | 27% (96) | 0 | 1 |
|  Energy | 11% (37) | 0 | 1 |
|  Health Care | 9% (33) | 0 | 1 |
|  Industrial | 12% (41) | 0 | 1 |
|  Technology | 9% (33) | 0 | 1 |
|  Materials | 4% (15) | 0 | 1 |
|  |  |  |  |
|  *N* | 353 |

**Table 3.** Type of Parent(s) Specified in Leave Policies

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *N* | *%* |
|  |  |  |
| Mothers Only | 25 | 11.06% |
| Fathers Only | 0 | 0.00% |
| Parents Only | 59 | 26.11% |
| Mothers and Fathers | 14 | 6.19% |
| Mothers and Parents | 114 | 50.44% |
| Fathers and Parents | 0 | 0.00% |
| Mothers, Fathers, and Parents\* | 14 | 6.19% |
|  |  |  |
| N | 226 |

*Note: Analyses exclude companies with gender neutral gendering policies.*

*\*These companies specify different periods of leave for mothers, fathers,*

*and adoptive parents. Adoptive parents are given longer leaves than fathers*

 *in all but one instance (average time off for adoptive parents in these companies*

 *is 6.21 weeks; average time off for fathers in these companies is 4.64 weeks).*



*N* = 254. *Note: For companies with gender neutral gendering policies, mothers are considered the primary caregivers and fathers are considered the secondary caregivers.*

**Table 4.** Results from Logistic Regression Models Predicting

Having a Paid Parental Leave Policy

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | *OR* | *SE* |
| Number of Employees (thousands) | 1.01\* | 0.00 |
| HQ in State with Leave | 1.70\* | 0.36 |
| *Industry (Technology as Reference)* |  |  |
|  Communication | 0.67 | 0.65 |
|  Consumer | 0.23\*\* | 0.12 |
|  Energy | 0.29\* | 0.16 |
|  Financial | 0.17† | 0.06 |
|  Health Care | 0.43\* | 0.22 |
|  Industrial | 0.23\*\*\* | 0.14 |
|  Materials | 0.17\* | 0.14 |

N= 353. Models account for clustering by US state. Results presented as odds ratios.

 †*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

**Table 5.** Results from Multinomial Logistic Regression Models Predicting Policy Classification

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Gender Modified | Gender Unequal Low | Gender Unequal High | Gender Neutral Gendering |
| Variable | *rrr* | *SE* | *rrr* | *SE* | *rrr* | *SE* | *rrr* | *SE* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Number of Employees (thousands) | 1.00† | 0.00 | 1.00 | 0.00 | 1.00 | 0.00 | 1.00 | 0.00 |
| HQ in State with Leave | 1.27 | 1.08 | 0.38 | 0.28 | 1.14 | 0.34 | 3.39\*\* | 1.29 |
| *Industry (Technology as Reference)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  Communication | 5.28 | 6.45 | 4.16 | 5.62 | 1.75 | 2.18 | 4.56 | 5.22 |
|  Consumer | 1.96\* | 0.66 | 1.64 | 0.99 | 0.69 | 0.26 | 0.53 | 0.33 |
|  Energy | 1.18 | 0.78 | 0.99 | 0.72 | 0.26† | 0.19 | 0.34 | 0.31 |
|  Financial | 1.26 | 0.68 | 1.05 | 0.78 | 0.60 | 0.28 | 1.42 | 0.73 |
|  Health Care | 0.92 | 0.78 | 0.96 | 0.75 | 0.22\* | 0.15 | 0.00\*\*\* | 0.00 |
|  Industrial | 0.28 | 0.36 | 1.62 | 1.14 | 0.14 | 0.17 | 1.25 | 1.16 |
|  Materials | 2.32 | 2.64 | 1.54 | 1.48 | 0.00\*\*\* | 0.00 | 0.00\*\*\* | 0.00 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

N = 254. Models account for clustering by US state; †*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001. Reference category is “gender equal”.

Results presented as relative risk ratios.

1. We focus on industry, company size, and public policy context here as these are the characteristics that we have information on in our data. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is defined as companies that are incorporated in the US, operate in the US, and file financial statements with a government agency (<https://fortune.com/fortune500/2018/methodology/>). *Fortune* also releases a Global 500 list that focuses on companies worldwide, but this list is not used as this study focuses exclusively on US companies. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Data from the Fortune 500 is lagged. Lists are published in May, but reflect data from the previous year (e.g., the 2018 list reflects data from late 2017/early 2018). Data collection began in early 2019 (prior to the release of the 2019 list). While it is possible that some policies were introduced in 2019, these policies are still relevant for an examination of parental leave policies among top companies (particularly because there is substantial similarity between years of the Fortune 500 (only 21 companies were different in the 2019 list compared to the 2018 list). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 75% of the data we compiled is directly from the company, with the remaining 25% coming from news articles or other organizations. We controlled for data source in supplementary models, and results are identical when data source is accounted for. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We also considered company revenues (in millions of dollars) in supplementary models. However, number of employees and revenues were highly correlated (.72); when both were included in the same model, neither factor was associated with offering paid parental leave or type of leave policy (due to high correlation). Results are largely similar when revenues and number of employees are included in separate models. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There are three companies classified as *gender modified* that do not exactly meet these criteria. One provides 10 weeks leave for mothers and 6 weeks to other parents (a gap of 4 weeks instead of 6-8). Two companies provide 22 weeks to mothers and 12 to other parents (a gap of 10 weeks). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 85% are classified as gender unequal low and 15% are classified as gender unequal high. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Comparisons between mothers and fathers were obtained using seemingly unrelated estimations and Wald tests. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This study focuses on employer-specific paid parental leave policies. These policies provide benefits to employees regardless of, and/or in addition to, any state-level paid family leave policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Additional analyses showed that company size was associated with nonresponse, with smaller companies being less likely to provide data on paid parental leave than larger companies. The likelihood of missing data did not vary by industry sector or being headquartered in a state with paid family leave. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)