

Time

<http://ideas.time.com/2013/08/21/viewpoint-stay-at-home-dads-will-never-become-the-norm/>

Labor

Stay-at-Home Dads Will Never Become the Norm

Despite a new awareness about full-time fathers, their numbers are still too minuscule to change society

By [Peggy Drexler @drpeggydrexler](#) Aug. 21, 2013

The endless debate about “work-life balance” often contains a hopeful footnote about stay-at-home dads. If American society and business won’t make it easier on future female leaders who choose to have children, there is still the ray of hope that increasing numbers of full-time fathers will. But based on today’s socioeconomic trends, this hope is, unfortunately, misguided.

Certainly, there is more awareness of the phenomenon of the stay-at-home dad. They have their own reality show: *Modern Dads*, which debuts tonight on AMC, about “a tribe of suburban child-rearing dudes who are just trying to do their thing.” And it’s true that men who have left work to do their thing as full-time parents has doubled in a decade, but the numbers are still minuscule: only 180,000, [according](#) to Census data, which University of Maryland Sociologist Philip N. Cohen [calculates](#) is only 0.8% of married couples where the stay-at-home father was out of the labor force for a year. Even that percentage is likely inflated by men thrust into their caretaker role by a downsizing. This is simply not a large enough cohort to reduce the social stigma and force other adjustments necessary to supporting men in this decision, even if only for a relatively short time.

Even shorter times away from work for working fathers are already difficult — and still unusual. A [study](#) by Boston College’s Center for Work and Family found that 85% of new fathers take some time off after the birth of a child — but for all but a few, it’s a week or two at most. Meanwhile, Women’s Health USA [reports](#) that the average for women who take leave is more than 10 weeks. While the Family and Medical Leave Act passed in 1993 guarantees 12 weeks (for companies over 50 employees) of unpaid leave around the birth of a child, Institute for Women’s Policy Research

[reports](#) that only 10% of private-sector employers offer access to paid parental leave.

Regardless of policy, such choices impact who moves up in the organization. Said one father I interviewed: “While you’re away, someone else is doing your work, making your sales, taking care of your customers. That can’t help you at work. It can only hurt you.” Women, of course, face the same issues of returning after a prolonged absence. But with many more women than men choosing to leave the workforce entirely to raise families, returning from an extended parental leave doesn’t raise as many eyebrows as it does for men. And the penalties can be stiffer, economically speaking. Men still earn more than women. Some of that discrepancy is because more women enter low-paying fields such as teaching, social work and nursing, in part because these fields tend to be more family-friendly.

All of these issues are intertwined. Women would make more if they didn’t break their earning trajectory by leaving the workforce, or if higher-paying professions were more family-friendly. Men wouldn’t face the often unwritten penalties of extended paternal leaves from their [jobs](#) if new fathers stood up en masse and demanded it. Right now, momentum toward that rebalancing is pushing against a century of expectation that began when the Industrial Revolution sent men off to work while women stayed home.

Until that very distant and unlikely turning point, stay-at-home fathers may make all the difference for individual families, but their presence won’t make a dent in the numbers of high-potential women who are forced to choose between family and career.