

### *Family-Friendly Policies in the Scientific Workplace*

The Association for Women in Science (AWIS), a national nonprofit organization that advocates for the interests of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), believes that creating work environments where employees can balance the demands of career and family is good policy for employers and employees, and that this holds true for government, university, and industrial work settings.

We define the term “family-friendly policies” to include all workplace policies that foster a culture that accommodates the holistic, work/life dimension of the workforce. Although often equated with the need for career-flexibility arising from responsibilities associated with child-bearing and child care, family-friendly policies should also encompass needs arising due to responsibilities associated with caring for elderly parents, sick partners, and adoptions.

The need for family-friendly policies was initially perceived as a mechanism permitting trained women professionals to remain in the workforce. In recent years, this perception has expanded. It is now recognized that, in order for the United States to retain a competitive skilled workforce, the nation’s employers must change their policies to make them more family-friendly for both men and women.

Efforts to make the workplace more family-friendly have come from both employer-initiated changes in benefits (employers of choice for women) and legislation. The key piece of legislation that addresses at least a portion of the needs of employees with care-giving responsibilities, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), was signed into law in 1993. FMLA applies to employers with 50 or more employees, and employees are guaranteed continued health insurance benefits and the same or equal position to the one held prior to going on leave. The law allows eligible employees (both women and men) to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year to support some family and medical needs. Unfortunately, even in organizations/institutions where family friendly policies are endorsed and promoted, there often exist real or perceived bias against employees (regardless of gender) who use these benefits to balance their work/life responsibilities. This bias manifests in negative impact on desirable work assignments/opportunities and promotions, with an overall negative impact on career growth and employee retention.

#### **Endorsement of FMLA in the Scientific Workplace**

*A WIS believes that the familyfriendly policies guaranteed by FMLA should be endorsed and encouraged for all scientific employees, regardless of work sector or career level.*

*Overcoming bias directed towards individuals who avail themselves of familyfriendly benefits will require cultural change and strong, visible leadership on this issue at the highest levels of the organization.*

Despite the profound importance of the ground-breaking FMLA legislation, research indicates that this law does not go far enough in ensuring that men and women who have significant caregiver responsibilities have the support and flexibility required in order to reach their full potential in the workplace. One significant way in which FMLA benefits could be improved for workers involves expanding the definition of “family member” under FMLA to include, for example, siblings and domestic partners.

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Another critical benefit needed by many employees with care-giving responsibilities is paid sick leave. In the United States, approximately one half of all workers in the private sector have no paid sick leave benefits (U.S. Department of Labor 2006), resulting in significant financial burden for workers who must take time off without pay to care for sick children and parents (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003).

Finally, research by Catalyst (2005) highlights the significant negative effect of parental stress associated with concern for the welfare of their school aged children, on workplace performance, career satisfaction, and cost to the employer. Specifically, Catalyst reports that approximately 2.6 million workers, male and female, are severely impacted by high anxiety about the welfare of their children (especially grades 6-12) after school, when they are often unsupervised. Employers who provided flexible work arrangements to accommodate parents' needs during this time of day saw positive effects on productivity, work performance and employee satisfaction and retention. Finally, Catalyst reported that these stressors are gender neutral and impact parents regardless of race and occupation level.

*In conclusion, AWIS endorses the view that family-friendly policies should be available for all STEM professionals regardless of gender, rank, or employment sector. AWIS applauds the leadership shown by academic institutions and corporations that have instituted and improved family-friendly policies to address needs of working families.*

## References

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