



# Work, Family, & Gender Issues in the United States: Current Perspectives and Challenges

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# Work-Family Policies in the U.S.

- Conceptualization of families:
  - Assumption that men were the economic providers, and that women would rely on their husband's earnings for their livelihood
  - In exchange for financial security, women were to be in charge of the home and childcare

# Post World War II

- U.S. economy characterized by
  - "Fordism"
  - Mass production
  - Full employment of males
  - Emphasis on the state as the provider of a social safety net
  - Increased personal consumption

# Current Societal Transformations

- Globalization
- Changing demographics and composition of U.S. families
- Women in the work force
- Ideological shifts

# Challenges

- Public policy and cultural ideas about appropriate gender arrangements in families have not kept up with contemporary trends
- Social policies designed around concept that government assistance is to be last resort
- Mainstream economists support less government intervention



# Gender Demographics

- 57.7% of all women 16 years and over are in the labor force (72,620,000)
- 70.2% of all men (82,327,000)
- 71.3 percent of women with children under the age of 18 are working outside of the home

(U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012b)

# Racial/Ethnic Demographics

- 36.2% of US population is of color:
  - 13.1% black
  - 5.0 % Asian
  - 16.7% Hispanic or Latino Origin
  - 1.2% American Indian and Alaska Native Persons
  - .2% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Island Persons
- California, Texas, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and New Mexico have become "majority-minority" states

# Social Class Issues

- Increase in:
  - Nonstandard work schedules
  - Job insecurity
  - Wide differences in earning
- High earning families faced with intense work demand
- Low earning families:
  - Little if any control over the hours they work
  - Do not earn enough money to provide for their basic needs or purchase care for their families



# The U.S. in Comparative Perspective

- Human Rights Watch:
  - United States does not provide adequate work-family supports, which burdens individuals and families unnecessarily (Human Rights Watch, 2011)
- OECD:
  - Ranked the United States as ninth-to-last out of 34 countries with respect to work-life balance (OECD, 2014).

# Gender Issues

- Women – “caring labor”
  - Children
  - Sick
  - Elderly
  - Disabled
- Women disproportionately in the helping professions
- Women face life cycle consequences
  - Only 21 percent of women want to work full time

# Ideological and Legal Commitment to Equality

- The Equal Pay Act of 1963
  - Instituted to “prohibit discrimination on account of sex in the payment of wages by employers”
- Current situation:
  - Women’s pay in the United States has gone from 59 percent of men’s in 1962 to around 80 to 84 percent today

# Ideological and Legal Commitment to Equality

- Flurry of efforts to address a 2008 Census Bureau report that stated that women's median annual earnings were 77.5% of men's earnings
- Disputed by various constituencies and depends on which data set is examined
  - Discrepancies based on age
  - Discrepancies depending on hourly vs. weekly earnings

# Ideological and Legal Commitment to Equality

- Paycheck Fairness Act meant to close gap between women and men:
  - Make wages more transparent
  - Require that employers prove that wage discrepancies are tied to legitimate business qualifications and not gender
  - Prohibit companies from taking retaliatory action against employees who raise concerns about gender-based wage discrimination
- No success in U.S. Congress despite multiple attempts

# Ideological and Legal Commitment to Equality

- Sexual Harassment and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Title VII is federal law that:
  - Prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, and religion
  - Applies to employers with 15 or more employees, including federal, state, and local governments



# Ideological and Legal Commitment to Equality

- Title VII – Sexual Harassment
  - Central focus is on extensive number of rules and policies concerned with regulating sexuality in the workplace
  - Focus on sexuality heavily criticized by feminists and policy makers

# Ideological and Legal Commitment to Equality

- The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978
  - This act makes it unlawful to discriminate against a woman with respect to hiring, firing and providing fringe benefits on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth or a related medical condition
  - Multitude of legal cases illustrate infractions:
    - Mothers have more difficult time being hired
    - General bias vs caregivers

# Intense American Workplace

- Ideal worker concept / Issues around work hours
- Since 1979 most other industrialized countries– dramatically reduced the number of yearly work hours
- U.S.: Proportion of workers putting in 50 hours or more per week increased by six percentage points for both genders

# Resistance to Supportive Work-Family Policies

- Employers and politicians:
  - Not financially feasible

"Employers in this country are already burdened by numerous federal, state and local regulations which result in million of dollars in compliance costs.... These mandated and largely unfunded 'cost of doing business' requirements in certain instances not only hinder and impede the creation of new jobs, but also inhibit our nation's employers from competing globally" (G. Roger King, 2011)
- Industrialized countries have increased their spending on child care from .35 percent of their GDP to .47 percent while we have expanded our expense from .03 to .11 since 1990 (Blau & Kahn, 2013)

# Why Supportive Work-Family Policies Matter

- Empirical research indicates that by:
  - Allowing employees more flexibility with respect to their hours and location of their work
  - Providing more individualized selection of benefits

Productivity increases and the retention of employees improves = profits

# Policy Recommendations

- Interaction between Employees, Employers, Governments, Transnational Bodies & NGO's
- Introduce examples of best practices in different sectors from U.S. and other nations
  - Provide empirical data how productivity has increased
  - Provide empirical data how employee's health has improved



# Policy Recommendations

- Flex time:
  - Employees should be allowed to determine a window of time when they arrive at work & then subsequently work a full day from that point onwards
  - Employees should be allowed to trade overtime work for time off instead of extra pay.

# Policy Recommendations

- Menu of choices
- Reduction in work time
- Re-conceptualization of part – time work
- Equal pay laws need to be enforced

# Policy Recommendations

- Expansion of knowledge base about family friendly policies
  - Empirical data should include quantitative and qualitative evidence
  - Cross-cultural perceptions
  - Life cycle research
  - Multi-level research
- Forums that bring together stakeholders
- Creative mechanisms of disseminating current knowledge

# Concluding Observations

- Good news: In the United States, women have gained in educational and employment opportunities

However relative gains in employment are not an actual improvement – men's labor force participation is down

- Not so good news: Women in the middle and the bottom have been losing relative ground along with men during this period of growing inequality

# Concluding Observations:

- Work – family issues are not just women's issues
- Work – family issues are not just employee's issues
- Work – family issues are not just employer's issues

**Thank You !!!**