

## 5. FULL EMPLOYMENT AND DECENT WORK: ENSURING WORK–FAMILY BALANCE

### WORK, FAMILY, & GENDER ISSUES IN THE UNITED STATES: CURRENT PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

*Bahira Sherif Trask*

From a historical perspective, the labor market and social policies in the United States have been based on a conceptualization of families that assumed that men were the economic providers, and that women would rely on their husband's earnings for their livelihood. Places of employment, schools, pensions, and health care programs were organized around the concept of a male wage earner, who earned a 'family' wage and his dependent wife and children, who were to be covered by his benefits.<sup>1</sup> Correlated with this notion, was the unwritten understanding that in exchange for financial security, women were to be in charge of the home and childcare. The United States, in tandem with the other countries in the Western world, supported this system, which included the belief in social protections for vulnerable individuals. Often referred to as Fordism, this was a societal arrangement that emerged after World War II in the West and was characterized by mass production, the full employment of males, an emphasis on the state as the provider of a social safety net, and increased personal consumption. An integral and often forgotten aspect of this system was the role of the state in reinforcing social relations, encouraging social connectedness, and promoting the stability of families (Carrington, 2002).

While from an ideological perspective, under Fordism, the contributions of both men and women were believed to be equally important to the well-being of the family unit, from a practical perspective, the economic dependence of women made them unequal to men. And despite the fact that this organizational model never applied to all U.S. families, it did describe the lives of many American middle and working class families in the post-World War II era through the mid-1960s. However, over the last half-century, in great part due to globalization, massive societal, economic, ideological, and technological changes have transformed the world. These transformations have also had a profound impact in the United States, changing the structure and composition of American families in essential ways. Single parent and dual-income families have become normative, and now are more frequent than the once prevalent two parent, single-earner households. Concurrently, the composition of the US labor force has been transformed as women now work outside the home, for pay, in record numbers.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dorothy Smith's (1993) article on SNAF – the Standard North American Family for an understanding of how this model of family life undergirds U.S. social policies, programs, and services.

Despite these fundamental societal changes, public policy and cultural ideas about appropriate gender arrangements in families have not kept up with contemporary trends.<sup>2</sup> The social welfare system has remained entrenched in the assumption that a specific family form, the two parent, economic provider–homemaker model, is still the basis of society. This is particularly problematic in the arena of social and family policies. Furthermore, in the United States, more so than in other industrialized countries, social policies are designed around the concept that government assistance is to be a last resort, provided only after families have first used available kin, community, and employer supports, or is only to be available for those individuals who do not have access to these supports. Many American mainstream economists support these values: they commonly endorse and even advocate for limited government involvement. This has led to a situation where many individuals are struggling to balance family and work obligations, and where many women, specifically, are uniquely vulnerable to not being able to undertake full employment over a lifetime.

A pivotal aspect of U.S. workplace employment policies, which complicates this scenario, is that they are often inequitably distributed among employees: the highest-paid workers tend to receive the best benefits packages while frequently the employees who may have the greatest need for family-support assistance from their employers, may be the least likely to receive them. These arrangements have particular implications for women in the labor force: they are the ones who often have to interrupt their employment over their life course, work part time, or make other work related decisions due to their continued significant involvement with caring labor and other familial responsibilities. The decisions women make in order to balance work and family obligations often have lifetime effects with respect to their monetary earnings, the jobs that are available to them, and the long-term trajectories of their careers. By interrupting their employment, women can accrue lifelong disadvantages, and concurrently, the labor force is deprived of their talents and contributions.

Contemporary social dynamics are also affecting the roles of men in the United States. A number of recent studies illustrate that men increasingly have work–family related concerns: as male involvement in family life becomes increasingly normative, younger men, in particular, expect and are expected to be very involved in the raising of young children, often creating friction between work expectations and familial life (Glavin, Schieman, & Reid, 2011). Moreover, in an increasingly globalized world, working women and men are at risk of losing their jobs either through downsizing or to individuals in other countries where labor is cheaper than in the United States. These changes have created an environment where despite a wealth of data about work–family balance and proposed potential solutions, very few policies and programs actually assist women and men as they ne-

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<sup>2</sup> A recent survey by the Pew Research Center found that 71% of Americans said they had “old fashioned values” when it comes to family and marriage (Pew Research Center, 2010).

gotiate their work and familial responsibilities. This has also lead to a situation where the labor force is not characterized by full employment.

### **A. DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE**

Starting in the mid-to-late 1960s, an unprecedented number of women joined the paid labor force in the United States. Strikingly, many of these women had young children – even though traditionally these were the women who were most likely to stay home. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2012), currently 57.7% of all women 16 years and over are in the labor force (72,620,000) compared to 70.2% of all men (82,327,000), and 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). The United States is not an isolated case: various studies indicate that this is a growing trend in other parts of the world as well, including in so-called ‘traditional’ societies where until very recently, women with young children were almost always culturally expected to stay at home. That said, the labor force participation of women peaked in 1999 and has since been on a decline in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. labor force is changing in other significant ways as well. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) predicts that over the next 10 years, the aging labor force will grow, but slowly, and that there will be a decline in the overall labor force participation rate (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). This decline is attributed to the decreased labor force participation rate of youths and people in their middle years. The slight decline of women in the labor force also contributed to the drop in the aggregate labor force participation rate (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). However, simultaneously, the participation rates of older workers (individuals 55 and over) are predicted to increase. The current projection is that the labor force will grow by 0.05 percent over the 2012– 2022 period. This compares to the previous 10–year period, 2002–2012 where the labor force grew by 10.1 million or 0.7 percent. As the population ages at an unprecedented rate, and skills based jobs gain in importance in a globalized economy, the lack of training opportunities for older workers is bound to become increasingly important (Little & Triest, 2002).

Diversity also plays an important role in the work and social life of the United States. As the United States continues to become ever more heterogeneous with respect to race, ethnicity and religion due to increased immigration, the labor force is reflecting this growing multiculturalism. According to the U.S. Census data (2012), people of color now make up 36.2% of the US population (13.1% black, 5.0 % Asian, 16.7% Hispanic or Latino

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<sup>3</sup> This has not necessarily been in the case in most other industrialized and developing countries where the labor force participation of women is on the rise. See for example reports by the OECD. The differences between the United States and other countries with respect to the full employment of women are commonly attributed, at least in part, to the more supportive work- family policies in those countries (see for instance, Esping-Andersen, 2013).

Origin, 1.2% American Indian and Alaska Native Persons, and .2% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Island Persons). Moreover, in a trend that is on the rise, California, Texas, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and New Mexico have become 'majority-minority states' meaning that over 50% of their populations are minorities. These demographics are mirrored in labor force statistics: currently approximately 36 percent of the labor force is composed of people of color, and this diversity is projected to increase. Moreover, between 2000 and 2050, new immigrants to the United States and their children will account for 83 percent of the increase in the working age population (Burns, Barton, & Kerby, 2012). This growth in the diversity of the U.S. population poses unique challenges to public policies, the labor market, understandings about normative families, and society as a whole, as we move further into the twenty-first century.

## **B. SOCIAL CLASS ISSUES**

Depending on social class, work intersects with family responsibilities in complex and differing ways. For instance, Bianchi (2011) illustrates that across the board, there is an increase in nonstandard work schedules, job insecurity as well as wide differences in earnings. High earning families are primarily faced with intense work demands: one or both parents frequently work very long hours with little if any time off over the course of a year. Their high incomes however, provide them with the resources to outsource most of their domestic responsibilities. Low-income families have a different set of challenges: they often are not able to work enough hours, have little if any control over the hours they do work, and do not earn enough money to provide for their basic needs let alone purchase care for their families. Those at the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder may be eligible for public assistance programs such as Early Head Start and subsidized child care, which helps them survive. Concurrently, middle class families in the United States are the ones facing rising job insecurities, lowered earnings, and virtually no assistance from public programs. Furthermore, quality care for both children and elders is so expensive that it is increasingly out of their reach. This makes the negotiation of work and family responsibilities exceedingly complex for all families along the socio-economic spectrum.

## **C. SPECIFIC GENDER RELATED CONCERNS**

Despite fundamental demographic and societal transformations in the United States, social expectations and public policies with respect to promoting work-family balance have been slow to change. Stereotypes about the 'appropriate' roles of women and men persist and fuel support for workplace environments and public policies that are based on a breadwinner – homemaker model of family responsibilities. These notions are coupled with neoliberal conceptualizations that markets and economies need to be 'unregulated'

in order for the US to thrive economically.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this has led to a situation where one-third to one-half of all Americans report that they experience virtually daily conflicts between their work and family responsibilities. A Human Rights Watch study released in February 2011 concluded that the United States does not provide adequate work-family supports, which burdens individuals and families unnecessarily (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

It is critical to note that work-family balance concerns affect employees in general, not just individuals with children, or only women. For instance, the Families and Work Institute reports that approximately one-third of employees say they consistently have to choose between advancing in their jobs or attending to their family or personal lives, and one-third will have dealt with elder care—care for a parent over the past year. These startling statistics have led the OECD to rank the United States as ninth-to-last out of 34 countries with respect to work-life balance (OECD, 2014).

While women and men are both impacted by the lack of supports for balancing work and family obligations, women face some specific, unique challenges. Extensive empirical research indicates that it is primarily women who spend time in 'caring labor': and not just caring for children, but also for the sick, elderly and disabled. Moreover, the 'caring professions' such as education, health care, and elder care (which are also lower paying professions) are also characterized by a disproportionately higher number of women (Folbre, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

The fact that many women continue to be the primary caregivers in families leads, at times, to detrimental consequences when their situation is viewed from a life cycle perspective. Furthermore, the entrepreneurial, free market model that dominates the U.S. labor market has specific repercussions for women vis-à-vis men due to its emphasis and expectation that individuals be completely committed to their jobs on a continuous and full time basis.

## **LIFE CYCLE CONSEQUENCES**

An often overlooked aspect of the work-family debate is the long-term consequences of

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<sup>4</sup> Neo-liberalism refers to an economic perspective wherein markets dominate, unfettered by regulations and work places are restructured to reflect a more entrepreneurial direction that includes decentralized wage fixing processes and a devolution towards self-management.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, about 82 percent of social workers, 69.9% of counselors, and 82.4% of human service workers are female (Polycymic, 2013). It is important to remember that care is context and person-specific. Some people and certain situations elicit more care making it difficult to quantify caring. Care also has a personal dimension – some individuals enjoy providing care and derive emotional rewards from this activity, while others may find care provision as burdensome. It is this constellation of characteristics that makes care as a commodity difficult to fold into policy discussions and decisions.

employment decision over the life cycle. Most work–family debates primarily emphasize the day–to–day or routine aspects of work–home negotiations or the gendered division of labor. However, often times there are long –term issues that are connected to the occupational cycles of certain professions. For instance, in many jobs career success is dependent on the efforts that individuals invest at the initial phase of their employment cycle. For women in particular, these early years often conflict with the same time that they are deliberating starting families. Thus, many women are faced with complex choices with respect to career trajectories and devoting time to their families with young children. At various points in their lifespan, women are much more likely to be engaged in caregiving responsibilities which constrain their participation in paid employment. For instance, Bianchi (2011), through the use of time diaries, has illustrated that mothers tend to adjust their work hours to coincide with their care responsibilities: in other words they choose jobs that allow them as much as possible to overlap job hours with children’s school schedules. These adjustments to work hours coincide with feeling of time pressure and stress and lead to only 21 percent of women stating that full–time work was the ideal employment situation for them. Instead, over 60 percent of mothers of school age children preferred part–time work. (Pew Center, 2007 in Bianchi, 2011).

While there is debate if women ‘choose’ to limit their employment as an adaptive response to their familial situations, there is no arguing that gender still strongly structures their choices. Women’s part time and interrupted employment mean that from a life span perspective, men and women do not finish in the same place with respect to their ultimate economic situations. Over their lifetimes, due to these interruptions, women are not always able to claim equivalent employment based benefits as men, and can even become more at risk of landing in poverty. Specifically, pensions and insurance benefits are affected by periods of low income and / or lack of work. Women may also be affected in more subtle ways to discrimination in the workplace. A number of studies illustrate that women are subjected to the ‘motherhood wage penalty’ because they are perceived as less committed to their jobs than men, even though they give no indication that this is necessarily the case (Bianchi, 2011). Thus, in the United States, despite a dominant ideological commitment to gender equality, men and women are often not equally situated at the start, in the middle and at the end of their career paths.

For a certain segment of the U.S. population this confluence of factors has led to what is often referred to as the ‘feminization of poverty’: more than one in seven women, 14.5 percent or nearly 17.8 million women, lived in poverty in the United States in 2012 (U.S Census, 2012). In contrast, the poverty rate for men has remained steady at 11 percent. The wage gap between men and women also remains surprisingly large. While according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor (2010) the youngest women in the labor force (those between 16 – 24) earned 93 percent of what their male counterparts earned, women who were between 45 – 54 earned 74 percent to that of men.

This discrepancy in the wage pay between women and men who are somewhat older has not changed for over a decade. These statistics illustrate that a number of societal influences (such as working in the caring professions, time off for caretaking responsibilities, and the types of work that are available to women) all impact women in a significant, economic manner.<sup>6</sup>

#### **D. AN IDEOLOGICAL AND LEGAL COMMITMENT TO EQUALITY: THE IDEAL VS. THE REAL**

In the contemporary United States, from an ideational perspective, there now exists virtually unanimous support for the equal treatment of all citizens. Specifically, most Americans support the notion of gender equality. This ideological orientation is supported by the law: women and men are to be treated fairly and equitably at the workplace and there are foundational legal provisions against discrimination based on sex. Three specific laws in the US reflect this commitment to gender equality with respect to employment: the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which includes Sexual Harassment), and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978.<sup>7</sup>

#### **THE EQUAL PAY ACT OF 1963**

A very important aspect of the U.S. commitment to gender equality is found in the Equal Pay Act which was signed into law in 1963 by the President John F. Kennedy. This act amended the earlier Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, and was instituted to “prohibit discrimination on account of sex in the payment of wages by employers.” Congress passed the EPA out of “concern for the weaker bargaining position of women” to provide an antidote to discriminatory wage structures that reproduced “an ancient but outmoded belief that a man, because of his role in society, should be paid more than a woman” (NWLC, 2011).<sup>8</sup> Various analyses indicate that overall women’s pay in the United States has gone from 59 percent of men’s in 1962 to around 80 to 84 percent today (Cohen, 2013; Milkman, 2013).<sup>9</sup> Among workers ages 25 to 34, women’s hourly earnings in 2012 were 93% to those of men (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Most recently, an extension of the laws established by the Equal Pay Act, entitled the Paycheck Fairness Act, has not successfully passed in the U.S. Congress despite multiple

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, professional women are far more likely to work in the health or education arenas, which are lower paid fields overall. In 2009, professional women in this area made up about 69 percent of the field.

<sup>7</sup> Due to space considerations I am only highlighting the most important pieces of legislation concerned with gender equality at the workplace. Another related piece of legislation, the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) is discussed in a separate presentation at this conference.

<sup>8</sup> This is an often cited quote from the Supreme Court Case of 1974, *Corning Glass Works v. Brennan*.

<sup>9</sup> The figures differ depending on whether the calculations are based on hourly or weekly earnings.

attempts.<sup>10</sup> This Act was proposed as an effort to address a 2008 Census Bureau report that stated that women's median annual earnings were 77.5% of men's earnings.<sup>11</sup><sup>11</sup> In response, the Department of Labor commissioned a major study to investigate the situation. The study conducted by CONSAD (2009), concluded that the current wage gap between women and men in the United States is not due to systematic gender discrimination, but is primarily the result of individual choices that women and men make with respect to employment. While this may be a valid argument purely from a quantitative perspective, it does not take into account the reality of employment conditions for contemporary U.S. workers: women and men may, out of great necessity, make difficult choices with respect to where they privilege their time.

### **SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND TITLE VII OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964**

Under U.S. law, sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII is a federal law that prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of sex, race, color, national origin, and religion, and it applies to employers with 15 or more employees, including federal, state, and local governments. Individuals who work for smaller businesses are usually protected by similar state anti-discrimination laws. Retribution against someone who complains of sexual harassment or participates in an investigation involving sexual harassment, is also illegal under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

In the United States, the legal foundation for sexual harassment laws was built on the original laws prohibiting racial harassment. The 1964 Civil Rights Act provides the basis. Most legal cases concerning women's rights at the workplace have been primarily enacted through court cases that have highlighted those actions that clearly violate women's rights. The cases are commonly associated with class action suits and high fines for the violators. Thus, in the United States, the emphasis on gender equality has centered primarily on an extensive number of rules and policies concerned with regulating sexuality in the workplace. However, this exclusive focus on sexuality is heavily criticized by feminists and policy makers both here and abroad. They point out that prohibiting sexual conduct in the workplace does not resolve issues of discrimination and harassment. Instead, both American and European feminists argue that women need to be better integrated into workplaces. In higher level professional sectors, many women are segregated from male dominated spaces and, thus, are not able to achieve top positions. Occupational segregation also occurs between low paid 'female' jobs and higher paid 'male' jobs.

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<sup>10</sup> There have been multiple attempts including in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> This statistic continues to be cited despite multiple questions about its accuracy in 2014. See all the op-eds in U.S. newspapers about President Obama using this statistic over the winter months.



Focusing exclusively on sexuality and harassment does not solve the fundamental problems.

### **THE PREGNANCY DISCRIMINATION ACT OF 1978**

An important applied dimension of the commitment to gender equality is the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 (PDA). The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 (PDA) is basically an amendment to Title VII of the Civil Rights act. 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. This law applies to employers with more than fifteen employees, employment agencies, labor organization and the federal government. Despite its basic intent, this law has not been very effective in promoting gender equality due to its limited nature. It does not provide rights to workers in the months and years following childbirth, thus not accounting for many women's domestic responsibilities. Our U.S. court system is full of cases of employers who continue to discriminate specifically against women who are unable to work the same number of hours as co-workers who may not have the same caregiving responsibilities (Bhushan, 2012). Moreover, both audit and experimental research indicates that employers have a tendency to discriminate against women whose resumes suggest that they are mothers (Budig & England, 2001).

### **E. THE INTENSE AMERICAN WORKPLACE AS A CHALLENGE**

Despite the fact that work–family negotiations have become a global phenomenon, studies indicate that American women and men have a particularly complex time balancing their personal and work responsibilities (Blau & Kahn, 2013). This can be attributed to the unique combination of workplace culture and the lack of supportive policies that characterize American society. In particular, the conceptualization of the 'ideal' worker who is completely dedicated to his or her job conflicts with realistically balancing work and family responsibilities. Moreover, as has been noted, interruptions in the lifetime work cycle due to leaves for family responsibilities also impacts individuals, and most commonly women.

### **WORK HOURS**

American employees are particularly strained due to two interrelated factors: most Americans work much longer hours than their counterparts in other countries in the industrialized world; and U.S. family / social policies do little if anything to support what are perceived as private problems and negotiations. For instance, since 1979, most other

industrialized countries have dramatically reduced the number of yearly work hours (Meyers & Gornick, 2004). This has not happened in the United States. Instead, for most American workers the length of the working day has been growing over recent years. A recent study reports that between 1979 and 2000, the proportion of workers putting in 50 hours or more per week increased by six percentage points for both genders (Cha, 2013). This leaves less time for leisure and personal pursuits, including care for children, the disabled and the elderly. Moreover, the same study found that long hours have led to occupational segregation: men are more likely to be found in higher paying jobs with longer hours, and women lean towards jobs that offer more flexibility with respect to time but also pay less.

“Using longitudinal data drawn from the Survey of Income and Program Participation ... mothers are more likely to leave male-dominated occupations when they work 50 hours or more per week, but the same effect is not found for men or childless women. Results also show that overworking mothers are more likely to exit the labor force entirely, and this pattern is specific to male-dominated occupations. These findings demonstrate that the norm of overwork in male-dominated workplaces and the gender beliefs operating in the family combine to reinforce gender segregation of the labor market” (Cha, 2013, p. 158).

Today in the United States even though women and men have equal access to education, jobs, and professions, their varied family responsibilities and the lack of family policies, disadvantages women more often over the long term. This is illustrated by recent empirical data that indicates that younger women and men who do not have familial responsibilities now have almost equivalent career opportunities and earnings, but that a significant income differential appears with age (Pew Research Center, 2013).

We have a situation in the United States where there is relatively equal access to most jobs, pay, and benefits for those who are in equivalent positions. However, for those individuals who need to either drop out of the workforce or who can only participate partially, their ultimate economic outcomes are usually adversely impacted. Since it is more often women who need to interrupt their employment, they are also the ones who suffer the economic and personal consequences over the long term.

## **F. RESISTANCE TO SUPPORTIVE WORK–FAMILY POLICIES**

Despite much empirical documentation about the long-term employment and social gains through policies that facilitate the lives of working individuals with family responsibilities, most U.S. employers have been slow to institute family friendly policies and programs. Instead, many employers and politicians contend that policies such as work flexibility, job sharing, paid leave, and telecommuting are associated with great economic costs. In other words, they do not believe that instituting family friendly policies is finan-

cially feasible, and will instead reduce the ability of the United States to stay economically competitive in the global arena. For instance, at a hearing in 2007 on the proposed Healthy Families Act which would guarantee a minimum of seven paid sick days to workers, a very limited number by global standards, G. Roger King, a partner at the Jones Day corporate law firm, argued that this act and any similar regulations to protect employees would lessen the competitive edge of the United States in the global market place.

"Employers in this country are already burdened by numerous federal, state and local regulations which result in millions 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." (Quoted in Earle, Mokomane, & Heymann, 2011, p. 196).

Empirical cross-cultural research on the effects of work-family policies does not provide support for the perspective that instituting more family friendly policies will make the United States less economically competitive. For instance, various studies in Japan, the United Kingdom and Sweden have shown that providing women with paid maternity leave leads to employee retention (Allen, 2003; Earle, Mokomane, & Heymann, (2011). In contrast, long hours often lessen employee productivity, as does not having a weekly day of rest. Shepard and Clifton (2000) illustrated for example, that in a study of eighteen manufacturing industries in the United States over thirty-five years, every 10 percent increase in overtime hours led to productivity declining by 2-4 percent.

In contrast, just recently, five European countries have given workers the right to demand a change to part-time and 12 now have legislation that forbids employers from discriminating against part-time employees (Blau & Kahn, 2013). None of this holds true for American workers. Moreover, when it comes to childcare we lag even further behind. Most industrialized countries have increased their spending on childcare from .35 percent of their GDP to .47 percent while we have expanded our expense from .03 to .11 since 1990 (Blau & Kahn, 2013).

Thus, we have a situation where despite striking demographic changes and a general recognition that individuals and families need more support, the United States lags far behind other industrialized and developing countries with respect to instituting family policies that assist individuals with family care responsibilities.

## G. CONCLUSION

Contemporary U.S. work-family policies provide limited support to families since most do not account for the fact that a majority of individuals are involved in both caretaking and employee responsibilities. Gender related job concerns and trends are well documented, and work-family balance is frequently found as a discussion point on national and local agendas. Yet, the United States is very far away from instituting policies that

would help women and men balance their dual responsibilities. The United States needs stringent policy changes that address both the challenges individual and families face on a regular basis, as well as the inequality issues that are at the crux of our current work–family policy situation.

## **MAINTAINING COST EFFECTIVE WORKPLACES WHILE EASING THE BURDEN ON WORKING FAMILIES**

As we move further into the twenty-first century, the challenge for the United States is to participate in a process that allows individuals and families, employers, and the government to engage in a dialogue that is mutually beneficial. We also need to find mechanisms that will lead to the implementation of policies that are more in keeping with the social and family changes that we are currently witnessing in our society. In particular, we need to change the fundamental assumption that employee and employer interests are mutually exclusive, and in opposition to one another. Empirical research indicates that allowing employees more flexibility with respect to their hours and location of their work, and providing a more individualized selection of benefits actually increases productivity and the retention of employees. Instead of decreasing an employer's profits, well thought out work–life policies can contribute significantly to the overall success of a business. Moreover, assuming that work–family issues are primarily only of concern to women is a fallacy. Especially younger men indicate that they expect to be fully involved with family responsibilities, necessitating work flexibility for them too. In the U.S. we need to support healthy, strong families – not just ideologically, but also with concrete actions. This includes making adjustments to school schedules, medical care, elder care, and other community based programs and services that support families.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CARE**

The care of children, elders, as well as the disabled and chronically ill, promises to be one of the most complex social issues facing Americans in the twenty-first century. With the proliferation of dual earner couples and single parent households, balancing care and work obligations is increasingly complex in economically precarious environments. There is a great need for policies and programs not just for families with young children but also for families that are caring for aging relatives and individuals with chronic illnesses or disabilities. Currently, approximately 65.7 million Americans (or 29% of the adult population) provide unpaid care to elders, the ill, or individuals with disabilities (National Alliance for Caregiving, 2009). Many of these individuals are part of the 'sandwich generation' – those people who care for children and aging parents concurrently, and work either full or part-time. Without adequate social supports, the strain on families will become untenable, and will adversely affect the talent that is available in the labor market.

We need to prioritize the concept that social policies do not operate in a vacuum but are created and utilized in varying cultural contexts. Research indicates that cultural attitudes in the United States increasingly endorse maternal employment outside of the home, and paternal involvement in family responsibilities. This sets the stage for a greater acceptance for policies that would ease the conflicts that can be caused by negotiating personal and work responsibilities.

The following are some policy recommendations, many of which are backed by significant empirical evidence that they make a pivotal difference in the lives of individuals and families, while not disadvantaging employers. Creating dialogues and collaborations between employees, employers, and the government would alleviate the social crisis we are currently facing.

#### **F. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Flex time: Scheduling flexibility should be mandated by federal law. Moreover there exists a need for two types of flex time:
  - Employees should be allowed to determine a window of time when then they arrive at work and 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.
- Menu of choices: Work places need to provide a menu of work time and benefit choices. In this way, individuals could better adapt their schedules to their particular familial needs. This may also encourage more men to participate in care responsibilities.
- Reduction in work time: The overall full-time work week needs to be limited to 35–39 hours, thus allowing employees more time with their families. Workers need to be guaranteed an adequate, yearly allowance of paid days away from work. In the alternative, the work year needs to be shortened to alleviate the strain of parents finding care for their children over the summer time. This would also give individuals more time to spend with their families.
- Re-conceptualization of part-time work: Part-time work needs to be more accessible and desirable: part time workers should receive benefits commensurate with full-time employees who are performing similar tasks at the work place. This would provide more economic security for workers and would incentivize more individuals to take on this type of work (Moen, Kelly, & Hill, 2011).
- Equal pay law enforcement: As an increasing number of American families become dependent on women's financial contributions to the household for their well-being, it is essential that women be paid equivalently to men for performing the same jobs.

- An expansion of the knowledge base about family friendly work policies, which needs to include:
  - Empirical data on various types of quality child care options, longer term parental leave options, family leave insurance programs, job sharing possibilities, and other mechanisms that have been proven to improve the work–family climate in some other industrialized and developing countries.
  - Increased research on cross–cultural perceptions of balancing work and family is needed; as our society becomes increasingly multi–cultural individuals will have very varied levels of responsibility with respect to caring for family members. We need to better understand what the variables are: including but not limited to how different jobs, family types and ethnic /racial groups vary in their perceptions and access to work–family balance.
  - Investigation regarding how work–family balance shifts over the life cycle and what needs individuals may have at various points in their lives.
  - Increased multi–level research that integrates individual and organizational perspectives and measures.
  - Multi–disciplinary research in organizations that documents how different individuals at various levels of the organization’s hierarchy experience work–family issues. For instance, individuals at the lower end will have less flexibility and control with respect to work flexibility. They will also have fewer resources for accessing high quality child and elder care.
- Increased interactive forums that include: stakeholders – working individuals, employers, policy makers – coming together and dialoguing about the issues pertaining to work–family balance and potential solutions.
- New creative mechanisms for disseminating the current body of knowledge about work–family negotiations and policies, i.e. breaking out of current silos and forging greater linkages between empirical data and public knowledge and policies.

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