

COMMENT

Policy Alternatives for Solving Work-Family Conflict

By
HEIDI HARTMANN

The failure of highly educated women to stay in the labor market represents a wasted societal investment. Despite publicity suggesting that educated mothers are increasingly staying home, the long-term trend is toward greater work effort by all mothers, especially highly educated ones. Policy measures can address the reasons some women do drop out by making it more possible for professionals, as well as other workers, to combine work and family. In addition, the double standard in parenting needs to be attacked so that, eventually, men are just as likely as women to take care of children at the same level of intensity and women's and men's labor force participation patterns will look even more similar than they do today.

Keywords: employment; family and work policies; family-friendly workplace

The failure of highly educated women to stay in the labor market represents a wasted societal investment. Despite the recent spate of publicity suggesting that educated mothers are increasingly staying home (Belkin 2003; Wallis 2004), the long-term trend is toward greater work effort by all mothers, including especially

Heidi Hartmann is the president of the Washington-based Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), a scientific research organization that she founded in 1987 to meet the need for women-centered, policy-oriented research. She is also a research professor at George Washington University. She is a coauthor of Unnecessary Losses: Costs to Americans of the Lack of Family and Medical Leave, Equal Pay for Working Families, and Survival at the Bottom: The Income Packages of Low-Income Families with Children. She has published numerous articles in journals and books, and her work has been translated into more than a dozen languages. She lectures widely on women, economics, and public policy; frequently testifies before the U.S. Congress; and is often cited as an authority in various media outlets. Prior to founding IWPR, she was on the faculties of Rutgers University and the New School for Social Research and worked at the National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences. In 1994, she was the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship Award for her work in the field of women and economics. She is vice-chair of the National Council of Women's Organizations.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716204269626

highly educated ones. Using fifteen years of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Stephen Rose and I found that about 30 percent of prime age women workers (women aged twenty-six to forty-four in 1983 who had at least one year with earnings between 1983 and 1998) were out of the labor force four or more years during the fifteen-year study period (Rose and Hartmann 2004). About half the women had earnings every year. The proportion with substantial time out of the labor market is significant, but it is a falling proportion. In the prior fifteen years, the proportions were reversed. About 50 percent of working women spent four or more years out of the labor force, while about 30 percent worked every year. Another data source, the Current Population Survey, has shown dramatic increases in the labor force participation of mothers. For example, between 1976 and 2002, women aged fifteen to forty-four who had a child in the prior twelve months increased their labor force participation from 31 to 55 percent. While the rate peaked in 1998 at 58.7 percent, and has fallen slightly since, the long-term trend is clearly one of increase (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). It is possible that the recent dip is due primarily to the end of the long economic boom, the subsequent recession, and the relatively jobless recovery. Married women with a youngest child under six years of age increased their labor force participation from 11.9 percent in 1950 to 62.8 percent in 2000, while married women with older children (children between the ages of six and seventeen) increased their labor force participation from 28.3 percent in 1950 to 77.2 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 1976, 2002).

Overall, women are increasing their labor force participation, and more educated women work more than other women. Yet despite the huge increases in mothers' labor force participation, taking time out of the labor market is not an uncommon experience for women.

Stone and Lovejoy (2004 [this volume]) identified five reasons women in their study decided to stay home. Two relate primarily to the work world, in which huge work demands were accompanied either by workplace inflexibility or economic restructuring. Two relate primarily to family demands—the perception on the part of the mothers that older children needed them more and, for a few, a strong commitment to traditional family values. A fifth reason is related to both the work and family spheres and is labeled “husband career spillover”—some of the husbands earn much more than their wives in very demanding jobs and do not help with family care. Several alternative labels might be considered for this phenomenon: husband exemption, husband inflexibility, husband power, male power, patriarchy.

The reason I find most puzzling is the presence of older children and the increased intensity that parenting teenagers is perceived to require. In general, much research finds that the older the children, the more time fathers spend with them, so if older children need more parental care, it seems that at least sometimes it might be the fathers and not the mothers who would take time off from work to spend with them. Also, since a substantial minority of married women outearn their husbands, it would be economically rational for fathers to become at-home parents in at least some families. For example, Rose and Hartmann (2004) found

that approximately 15 percent of women who were continuously married and employed for fifteen years earned more than their husbands over that period.

Is the tendency of some highly privileged women to stay home with teenagers just another example of increased cultural support for ever rising standards of ever more intensive parenting? Or does it simply correspond to the time in the mother's career when she faces challenges at work and realizes she will either have to find a new job if she wants to move ahead or stay where she is and stagnate, the typical midcareer challenge? When faced with blocked careers, men seem to change their hairstyles, buy sports cars, and have affairs and/or look for a new job. Do women at a similar career stage stay home with their teenagers? Is staying at home a socially sanctioned alternative to forging ahead at work or coming to terms with work—for high-achieving women? Is it an alternative that is especially convenient for the continued dominance of men in leadership positions in society?

Overall, women are increasing their labor force participation, and more educated women work more than other women.

In terms of policy solutions, our society could go several different ways in attempting to solve work-family challenges. First, of course, is always the status quo or no change. This alternative seems the least likely to me, simply because women are voting with their feet, toward more work in the labor market. They are investing in themselves by increasing their educational attainment; they are generally marrying later and having fewer children. They seem to be seeking economic autonomy and economic security through their own employment as well as through marriage and family formation.

Second, women could become more like men. This is the course we have been following. In their economic behavior, women have become more like men. Women have increased their labor force participation dramatically, along with their educational preparation. Now the pattern of women's labor force participation over the life cycle looks quite similar to men's. It peaks in the prime earning years, and in the aggregate, we no longer observe a dip in women's labor force participation during the childbearing years. Married women with children have also increased their hours of work substantially—from 869 hours in 1979 (that is, less than a half-time job) to 1,255 hours annually on average in 2000, an increase that is equivalent to working ten additional weeks at full-time hours (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003). The more intense labor force participation by women is no

doubt increasing the demand for more family-friendly workplaces. I expect this trend, for women's economic behavior to increasingly resemble men's, to continue.

Third, men could become more like women. While in some ways men's behavior is becoming more like women's, changes in this direction have been far more limited. Between 1950 and 2000, men's labor force participation fell more than 15 percentage points (from 86 percent in 1950 to 71 percent in 2000), while during the same period women's rose nearly 25 percentage points (from 34 percent in 1950 to 58 percent in 2000). Thus, men's and women's labor force participation is converging—once more than 50 percentage points distant, there are now less than 15 percentage points separating them (Jacobs 2004). As men work less, are they doing more housework? To some extent, yes. Pointing out that married men are the only group of adults who increased their time spent on housework between 1978 and 1988, Francine Blau (1998) argued that this change represents the better bargain that working women are able to strike with their husbands. Subsequent to the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act in 1993, a slightly larger proportion of men than women report taking advantage of its provisions to care for a newborn, newly adopted, or foster child (Commission on Family and Medical Leave 2000). I also expect this trend, of men changing their behavior to spend more time out of the labor market and in family care, to continue, albeit slowly.

Fourth, women's economic behavior could remain different from men's and society could compensate women better for their time spent in child rearing and family care. Currently, most women are able to work fewer hours than men and devote more time to family care on average than men do because they marry higher-earning men and rely on them financially. As a society, we in the United States rely on individual men to compensate women for their lost working time, a mechanism that due to nonmarriage and divorce is imperfect at best. Our social provisions for single mothers are penurious, and we have even fewer subsidies for middle-class women who provide family care full-time. The amount of social compensation that would be necessary to make women whole were they not relying on individual men would be quite large, so this societal choice seems very unlikely to me, though there are many potential ways of providing partial redress that could be helpful (such as providing caregiver credits in the Social Security System; see Hartmann and Hill 2000).

Fifth, we could adjust our social and economic institutions to be more compatible with caring by both men and women. Stone and Lovejoy (2004) emphasized this alternative in their policy recommendations. They stressed the need for more good part-time jobs—part-time jobs that would pay well per hour, provide fringe benefits, and lead to career growth. Unfortunately, such part-time jobs are all too rare, even in professions that require a high level of educational preparation. In a study on part-time work among professionals and managers, Hartmann, Yoon, and Zuckerman (2000) found that only a few occupations offered part-time jobs at all comparable to full-time jobs—the best were held by nurses (in the public and private sector), scientists (including engineers, mathematicians, and computer and natural scientists) in large private firms, and special education teachers. While the

development of better part-time jobs could create a part-time ghetto for women, I am less concerned about such a development than I once was. I think men would increasingly opt for reduced hours if the quality of jobs were better. Substantial shares of both men and women work part-time under age twenty-five and over age sixty-one. Currently, however, in the child-rearing years, men's part-time work falls while women's increases. Men are probably working more hours during these years than they would prefer, at least partly to compensate for women's reduced hours. Better reduced-hours employment opportunities would make this a more attractive option for both genders. Other working-hour policies that could improve gender equity include reducing the normal work week for all, below the forty hours where it has been stuck since 1938 when the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed; protecting workers from mandatory overtime; increasing the premiums paid for overtime work; and including professional workers in the overtime provisions.

The more intense labor force participation by women is no doubt increasing the demand for more family-friendly workplaces.

In my view, one important strategy for bringing about a more equitable division of labor between the sexes is to develop a multifaceted campaign against the double standard in parenting. Currently, society accepts a double standard in which mothers do much more of the parenting work than fathers. Mothers invest more of their time in caring for their children personally, take more time off from work to do so, and impose higher standards on the quality of their own care of children than men do. They seem to feel more guilt than men do when they work long hours. Indeed, there seems to be an ideology of intensive motherhood developing that threatens not only to rein women in and get them back in the home but also to destroy the progress our society has made in getting men more invested in their children (Hays 1996). It undermines gender equity as well. It also threatens to set up the conditions for another male critique of women who mother too much and ruin their children's lives, similar to what occurred in reaction to the domesticity of the 1950s. To prevent this predictable scenario, we need to mount a serious attack on this growing ideology in the popular media, stressing the importance of women's career development to women's self-fulfillment (a happy mother is a good mother) and the value of good-quality group child care and preschool to the healthy development of children. We also need to generate a flood of studies showing how critical men's involvement is to their children's healthy development and to be sure these findings also permeate public opinion. We need to support women

who want to put career first and men who want to put family first. And most of all, we need to develop and support norms of sharing caring labor. This struggle is too important to allow a conservative ideology to blanket the airwaves and the opinion space and push us back to a 1950s feminine mystique.

References

- Belkin, Lisa. 2003. The opt-out revolution. *The New York Times Magazine*, October 26, p. 42.
- Blau, Francine D. 1998. Trends in the well-being of American women, 1970-1995. *Journal of Economic Literature* 36 (1): 112-65.
- Commission on Family and Medical Leave. 2000. *Balancing the needs of families and employers*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration.
- Hartmann, Heidi, and Catherine Hill. 2000. *Strengthening social security for women: A report from the working conference on women and social security*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.
- Hartmann, Heidi, Young-Hee Yoon, and Diana Zuckerman. 2000. *Part-time opportunities for professionals and managers: Where are they, who uses them and why?* Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.
- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Jacobs, Eva E. 2004. *Handbook of U.S. labor statistics*. Lanham, MD: Berman.
- Mishel, Lawrence, Jared Bernstein, and Heather Boushey. 2003. *The state of working America 2002/2003*. An Economic Policy Institute Book. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Rose, Stephen J., and Heidi I. Hartmann. 2004. *Still a man's labor market: The long-term earnings gap*. Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.
- Stone, Pamela, and Meg Lovejoy. 2004. Fast-track women and the "choice" to stay home. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 596:62-83.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 1976. *Statistical abstract of the United States: 1976*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- . 2002. *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2002*. Washington, DC: National Technical Information Service.
- . 2003. *Fertility of American women: June 2002*. Report P20-548. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.
- Wallis, Claudia. 2004. The case for staying at home. *Time* 163 (12, March): 50.