

Why mothers' choices about work and family often feel like no choice at all ^[1]

When policymakers frame “choices” as personal preferences, it distracts from major structural constraints.

Author: Miller, Claire Cain

Source: The Upshot: New York Times

Format: Article

Publication Date: 17 Jan 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

If liberals and conservatives can agree on anything about family policies, it's this: Parents should have choices.

Senator Elizabeth Warren said her plan for universal child care would give parents “the freedom to choose the best work and child care situation for themselves.”

Ivanka Trump, at a White House summit about family policies, said, “Our vision is to give each parent the resources and support they need to make the best choice for their children.”

Senator Bill Cassidy, Republican from Louisiana, and Senator Kyrsten Sinema, Democrat from Arizona, said of their parental leave bill: “This straightforward, bipartisan path forward provides parents with real choices.”

“Choice” has become the favorite term in family policy. Yet many parents — particularly women — feel their decisions about work and family are made within such constraints that they have little choice at all.

The United States offers neither paid family leave for all workers, nor public preschool. Child care is often unaffordable, inadequate or unavailable. Many Americans face work hours that are long and unpredictable, as well as rising health and housing costs. Women's earnings stall after having children, and mothers spend significantly more time taking care of children than fathers do.

“The language of choice is used to suggest that these women have choices, while the language that should be there is they have no choice but to,” said Shani Orgad, a professor at the London School of Economics and author of “Heading Home: Motherhood, Work and the Failed Promise of Equality.”

Framing how to balance work and family as personal choices, researchers say, distracts from the bigger structural issues that force these choices. Individuals are left to figure out how to make it work — and feel guilty when it doesn't.

“It's extremely difficult to have a structural conversation about it,” said Kirsten Swinth, author of “Feminism's Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family” and a history professor at Fordham. “People say, ‘I just need to organize my life like this and make the right choices.’ Nobody's saying, ‘I'm making choices in an impoverished world.’”

The language also hides inequalities based on gender, race and wealth. Very few parents have enough money to choose whether to opt out of paid work entirely. And when politicians talk about parents making choices, it's really about mothers — rarely is a man asked how he divides his time between work and family.

For everyone, life consists of making choices within constraints, and women's choices have long been particularly limited (as “Little Women” is currently reminding moviegoers). But the word has become politicized in the United States. Choice — which appeals to core American values of freedom, independence and individualism — is also used to talk about many other topics in American politics, including health care, schools and housing.

Research has found that when Americans in particular are asked to think about daily actions as choices, it decreases their support for policies that support the public good and their empathy for people with fewer advantages.

In family and gender policy, “choice” can mean various things politically. It can speak to women having autonomy over their lives (as it does in another context: reproductive rights), or to limiting government overreach into people's lives.

Today's use of the word in the context of family policy dates to the 1980s, when women had started entering the labor force in large numbers. Two distinct ideas arose, Ms. Swinth has written. One was that the public and private sectors would help both men and women accomplish paid and unpaid labor, with policies like flexible hours, subsidized child care and paid leave. The other was that individuals were responsible for making decisions about work and care, without direct aid from government or business.

The latter idea prevailed. Under President Ronald Reagan, there was a new political alliance — between free-market conservatives (who believed in small government) and social conservatives (who championed traditional family structures). They agreed that it was the responsibility of parents, not public policy, to invest in children, as the sociologist Melinda Cooper has written.

In 1981, the economist Gary Becker argued that free-market principles applied in the home as well. The family functioned like a small factory, with each person making rational choices to maximize value, he wrote in “A Treatise on the Family” (part of the body of work for which he would later win the Nobel Prize.)

“It’s neoliberalism as an economic system — the deregulation and the disinvestment in support and care,” Ms. Orgad said. “But it’s also neoliberalism as a rationality — how we as individuals internalize this idea that we are responsible for our lives and it’s our fault if we fail, because we make choices.”

By the mid-1980s, the idea had solidified as “A Mother’s Choice,” as a 1986 Newsweek headline put it. The choice was presented as either/or — work or stay home — or to explain why women “choose” lower-paying jobs.

“What’s implicit in the conservative logic is that good mothers make the right choice, and the right choice is to prioritize your family,” Ms. Swinth said — though she said this logic applied primarily to married, middle-class, white women.

Feminists pushed back, arguing that the choice they had been fighting for was never between working or staying home. They always wanted changes in workplace culture, public policy and men’s involvement at home, along with career opportunities.

In the mid-1980s, in a landmark employment discrimination case against Sears, Roebuck and Co., the company argued that women were not promoted because they did not choose high-paying or stressful jobs. Sears won, but in testimony, Alice Kessler-Harris, a labor historian, offered an alternate lens: “Choice can be understood only within the framework of available opportunity.”

In a 1991 paper, “Gender Wars: Selfless Women in the Republic of Choice,” Joan C. Williams, a work-life law scholar, wrote: “This insistent focus on the ‘choices’ of individual actors deflects attention from the truly stunning consistency with which it ‘happens’ to be wives who ‘choose’ careers that ‘accommodate their children’s needs,’ while husbands continue (as they always have) to perform as ideal workers.”

Today, the divide is less stark: Three-quarters of mothers are employed. But many feel forced to make painful decisions, like leaving their child in inadequate care, or working in scaled-back jobs they say they wouldn’t have chosen under different circumstances.

It’s still framed as a woman’s own decision — lean in or opt out — and the language of choice continues to shape policy debates.

Democrats have proposed new federal programs, financed by taxpayers, that would provide things like paid family leave and public preschool — which they say would free parents from the limits on their choices today.

Republican proposals focus on individual solutions — like letting new parents draw down their Social Security or tax credits early, and providing funding to increase the number of home-based family child care providers. They say these would give parents more choice without having the government sway them in any direction, and ensure that “the people making different choices than you aren’t paying for your choices,” said Carrie Lukas, president of the Independent Women’s Forum, a conservative policy group.

“It’s not just society forcing women to work less,” she said. “Or maybe it is partially society forcing them to, but at some point I think we’ve just got to accept the idea of women wanting to do this. I want them to have the best options possible and the most say to decide what their own personal preferences are.”

Preferences are shaped by policy, culture, the workplace and the realities of daily life. The question is how women’s choices might change if their options were different.

Related link:

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: mother's labour force participation ^[4]

family ^[5]

Women ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/01/why-mothers-choices-about-work-and-family-often-feel-no-choice-all>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/01/why-mothers-choices-about-work-and-family-often-feel-no-choice-all> ^[2]

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/upshot/mothers-choices-work-family.html#click=https://t.co/YyclHz58sa> ^[3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> ^[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142> ^[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family>

^[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/women>