Men, fathers, and work-family balance [1]

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Source: Centre for American Progress
Format: Report
Publication Date: 4 Feb 2015

AVAILABILITY
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Introduction

University of Oregon Sociologist Scott Coltrane and colleagues correctly stated that there is a "mismatch between the workplace and workforce" in the United States today. While about half of American families in the 1970s had a breadwinning father and a homemaking mother, only about one-third of families today fit that description. Dual-earner couples have become the norm in American society, thanks to women's expanded workforce participation; both partners work in 59.1 percent of married couples with children, and 68.2 percent of single mothers are also employed outside the home. The continued workforce participation of mothers with preschool-aged children has dramatically affected work and family life; in 2013, 63.9 percent of mothers with children younger than age 6 were in the labor force.

The gender composition of the labor force is not the only significant shift of the past 40 years. A sharp decline in manufacturing jobs since the 1970s-jobs that were traditionally held by males-and a simultaneous rise of the often female-dominated service economy radically changed employment opportunities for the least educated American workers. Well-paid, stable employment opportunities with good benefits have largely been replaced with less stable jobs with highly variable work hours and few benefits. Women's increased educational attainment has contributed to their earning potential, with more women holding bachelor's degrees than men. But the collapse of American manufacturing also set the stage for a shift in primary breadwinning. A Pew Research Center study found that 37 percent of married heterosexual mothers out-earn their husbands. At the same time, according to the Center for American Progress, 40.9 percent of mothers are the sole or primary breadwinners for their family and another 22.4 percent are co-breadwinners, meaning they bring home between 25 percent and 49 percent of their family's earnings. The number of stay-at-home fathers-while still quite small-has increased at a remarkable rate, from 1.6 percent to 3.4 percent of all stay-at-home parents in the first decade of the new millennium. Combine these shifts with an aging population and the corresponding increasing amount of unpaid elder care work in which many Americans, mainly women, are engaged, and the U.S. workforce today is vastly different than it was just 50 years ago.

Despite these dramatic shifts, workplaces are still largely organized for the so-called ideal worker-an individual who is unencumbered by family responsibilities. Across the wage spectrum, employers expect and reward workers who demonstrate full commitment to work. Much research on overwork has documented the ways technology and increased expectations have expanded work hours for white-collar workers. While these workers often work well in excess of 40 hours a week, workers at the opposite end of the work spectrum struggle with underwork-meaning too few hours due to an increased emphasis on last-minute scheduling to minimize labor costs. For low-skilled, often hourly workers, an expectation of full availability at all business hours often accompanies variable schedules that are often erratic and do not offer enough hours. In fact, employers rank availability as important as work experience and rank it "more important than references or skill training," according to an Urban Institute report. Workers of all types struggle with unrealistically demanding workplaces, many of which offer few resources to balance work and family responsibilities.

Significant research exists on how the state of work in the United States disadvantages women. Some examples of the penalties and challenges women face in the workforce include the motherhood wage penalty, which is when mothers earn less than their male counterparts and women without children, potentially based on assumptions associated with motherhood and work. Sociologist Shelley Correll, who has chronicled the motherhood penalty, has identified the potential negative impact that work interruptions after having a child can have on women's earnings, the career penalties stemming from pursuing flexible work arrangements, and a more general bias against caregivers. For example, workers in jobs related to caregiving generally receive hourly pay lower than would be predicted based on the requirements and qualifications for those jobs.

Whether it is the so-called mommy track, leaning in, or confidence gaps, this wealth of research is often presented in the public sphere in such a way that work-family fit has largely been framed as a women's issue; most often, it is framed as a mother's issue specifically. In turn, important concerns such as flexible work options, paid family leave and paid sick days, and pay inequality are overlooked as policy challenges that require urgent attention.

However, these issues are not specifically women's issues. Rather, they affect the work and family lives of all Americans. While it is important to address the specific needs of women and mothers as workers, the aim of this issue brief is to outline how work-life issues such as workplace flexibility, paid leave, and pay equity should very much be seen as issues affecting men directly, not just in their roles as partners, fathers, colleagues, and friends of women.

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