

# What happened to working women? <sup>[1]</sup>

Opinion

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## EXCERPTS

Japan now has a higher proportion of working women than we do. I'm trying to get my head around this fact.

"Everyone else is continuing to rise and we've declined, and now we're basically tied with Japan. And Japan's on the upswing and we're still going down," said Jason Furman, chairman of President Obama's Council of Economic Advisers. He was pointing to a chart that shows women in the labor force in 24 countries. These are the usual suspects when we're comparing ourselves to other societies — Australia, Belgium, Canada, etc.

"When it came to women in the workplace, the United States used to be seventh. "And now we're 20th," said Furman in a phone interview. You'll be happy to know that while Ireland also seems to be closing in on us, it'll be a hell of a long time before we fall below Turkey.

Stick with me for a minute on this. We spend half of our national debate time talking about how economically fragile Americans feel. Why do you think that is? Well, there's the whopping disproportion of national wealth flowing into the pockets of the already-wealthy. And the plummeting power of labor unions.

But women falling out of the work force is also a huge deal. It reduces family standards of living and puts a crimp in the economy.

And why do you think this is happening? One of the reasons is clearly, positively, absolutely the cost of child care.

It's incredible that we've built a society that relies on women in the labor force yet makes no discernible effort to deal with this problem. The Economic Policy Institute, a liberal think tank, recently divided the country into 618 "family budget areas" and determined that in more than 500 of them, the cost of child care for a family with a 4-year-old and an 8-year old would exceed housing costs. Also, if you're a working single mother with those same two children in, say, Buffalo, child care probably eats up a third of your income.

And infant care is impossible. In most states infant care is more expensive than college tuition.

We generally — and rightly — talk about early childhood education as something that's critical because it increases kids' chances of success in school. But as Carmel Martin of the Center for American Progress points out, "there's also evidence of a positive effect on the economy over all."

I am going to take a huge leap of faith and say that Japan is not trying to bring its mothers into the work force because of its historic commitment to feminism. (Last year, when a member of the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly made a speech calling for more services for women, she was taunted with cries of "Get married!" and "Can't you even bear a child?")

But the prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is convinced that encouraging working women will stimulate the economy. Now Japan, where 64 percent of working-age women are employed, compared to 63 percent in the United States, is in the process of creating 400,000 new prekindergarten spaces.

We will now stop for a moment and recall that in 1971, Congress passed a bipartisan bill that would have made quality preschool education available to every family in the United States that wanted it, with tuition based on the family's ability to pay. Also after-school programs for older children. Forty-four years ago! Richard Nixon vetoed it, muttering something about "communal approaches to child rearing."

There's also paid family leave. Japan guarantees that mothers get 58 weeks of maternity leave, about half of it paid. In this week's Democratic debate, Bernie Sanders said he was embarrassed that the United States was the only "country on earth" that did not guarantee workers paid maternity leave. This was inaccurate, since Sanders completely overlooked the situation in Papua New Guinea.

Our current government policy requires that employers give new mothers 12 weeks of unpaid leave. This was based on a bill passed early in the Clinton administration. I remember well the combination of joy (parental leave!) and despair (three months with no pay?).

During the debate Hillary Clinton laced into Carly Fiorina's argument that government shouldn't "dictate to the private sector" about

family leave. “They don’t mind having big government to interfere with a woman’s right to choose and to try to take down Planned Parenthood. They’re fine with big government when it comes to that. I’m sick of it,” Clinton said. It was really one of her better moments.

You may be stunned to hear that while the Republicans talk endlessly about ginning up the American economy, the idea of helping working mothers stay in the labor force does not come up all that often. Although Ben Carson has described preschool as “indoctrination.”

From Richard Nixon to Ben Carson, and wow, nothing’s changed.

-reprinted from the New York Times

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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work life balance <sup>[5]</sup>

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