



## How American Mothers Can Launch a Social Movement for Workplace Flexibility

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Over the past fifty years, American mothers have been entering the paid workforce in greater numbers than ever before. The transition has not been easy, as women struggle with how to combine paid work with care-giving in the home.

Some women with the means to do so have chosen to be stay-at-home mothers. Now in the minority, these moms often find themselves doing difficult work in isolated circumstances; and too often they have felt stigmatized for “not living up to their personal potential” in an era where women’s worth is increasingly defined by holding a paying job.

Women who work outside the home by choice or economic necessity have likewise faced a host of problems. Although some scholarly research finds psychological benefits for women and their children, many job-holding mothers actually “in the trenches” feel overwhelmed. This can be true even for women who have partners at home. Although fathers have increased their contributions to household-based work over the past several decades, mothers continue to shoulder the predominant burden – even when they must do so upon arriving home after a full day at work. Regardless of many couples’ good intentions, truly shared parenting is not so easy to achieve in practice. Many mothers report there are not enough waking hours to satisfy workplace demands without shortchanging their families.

### American Mothers Organize

To cope with this myriad of work-family challenges, American mothers have turned to one another and formed five nationally organized groups that maintain centralized rosters:

- **Mocha Moms**, established in 1997, focuses on serving mothers of color who have decided to be at-home at this point in their lives, although all mothers are welcome to join.
- **Mothers of Preschoolers**, founded in 1973, stresses the promotion of Christian values among its membership of mostly stay-at-home mothers.
- **Mothers & More**, started in 1987 to help mothers transition into and out of the workforce, now focuses on helping all mothers connect with each other for mutual support.
- **MomsRising**, an Internet-based group established in 2006, advocates for the introduction of family-friendly policies in the workplace among many other public policy issues.
- **The National Association of Mothers' Centers**, started in 1975, is a community-driven organization that stresses grassroots activism on behalf of issues that affect both stay-at-home mothers and mothers who work for pay.

Each of these groups helps in its own distinctive fashion, yet the energy they channel has yet to be fully harnessed to create a broad national movement able to advance reforms at both the corporate and governmental levels.

### Common Challenges for Mothers

But is such a movement possible? “Mommy Wars” stories in the media constantly stress irrevocable splits between stay-at-home mothers and mothers who work for pay. Yet in the real world, mothers transition both into and out of paid employment throughout their children’s lives. Whether they are currently working for pay or doing care-giving in the home, most understand and have compassion for the situations of other mothers.

Key concerns are widely shared.

- During children's development from infancy through adolescence, many mothers find that they need interpersonal support. Current patterns of residential life often leave families and friends geographically far apart. Women with jobs may not find their place of employment ideal for discussing family challenges, and stay-at-home moms often lack opportunities for regular interaction. For both sets of women, mothers' groups can provide a whole host of resources, including day-to-day assistance and parenting information and forums.
- In thinking about their ideal job, both mothers who work for pay and those who (at any given time) work at home describe the importance of flexible employment arrangements – such as compressed work weeks, flexible starting and stopping times, and advanced notice of overtime and shift schedules. They also agree that jobs should offer possibilities for taking time off, especially short stints to handle unexpected family issues. Both sets of mothers support governmental policies that would educate firms about the benefits of family-oriented flexibility and offer tax breaks to firms that offer such arrangements.

## **The Challenge of Building a Social Movement**

Research has identified work-place policies that can help mothers, and existing organizations have demonstrated that mothers in various situations can be organized to pursue shared goals. But much remains to be done to build a movement.

- Mothers' organizations must give more attention to the workplace flexibility concerns of their members, and learn to work together to bring a unified movement to fruition.
- Political leadership is also central. Elected leaders and policymakers can do a great deal to raise the public visibility of work-family issues and devise incentives for businesses to find better and more consistent ways to support working parents.

Aided by cooperation among existing organizations and bolder public leadership, my research shows that U.S. mothers are poised to come together and spotlight workplace flexibility as a critical goal in this new century.

**Read more in Jocelyn Elisa Crowley, *Mothers Unite! Organizing for Workplace Flexibility and the Transformation of Family Life* (Cornell University Press, 2013).**