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What Can Government Do to Support Employed Mothers?

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Like the citizens of other rich democracies, Americans are coming to terms with new realities about families and employment. Expectations for mothers have changed especially quickly in an era of rising paid employment for women, including those with very young children. Many have gained from these changes – but new dilemmas have emerged about how to combine responsibilities in paid jobs with needs to care for children and others. What has happened, and what are the options for the future?

An Incomplete Transition

Decades ago, women were seen as destined to spend their lives as caregivers in households headed by breadwinning men – that is, men who, ideally, would earn wages sufficient to support a family. In the middle of the twentieth century, U.S. taxes and social programs were designed around this family ideal. Social Security, for example, included a benefit for survivors of deceased wage-earning men. And Aid to Families with Dependent Children was intended to help very needy mothers living on their own raise their children at home. Women's work as family care-givers was recognized in such traditional social programs, but at the price of reinforcing women's exclusion from market opportunities.

The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged gender inequality and women's exclusion from the workforce and well-paid professional, managerial and skilled blue-collar careers. Legal barriers have since been removed, and American women have made strong gains in higher education and have benefited from enlarged career opportunities. Even so, many gender gaps remain in pay and representation in elite positions, including government office. And in lower-paid occupations without job-related benefits like health insurance, women are often paid less than male counterparts and face difficult trade-offs in working enough hours to survive while also raising children or caring for disabled elders. In the emerging system, mothers are encouraged – and often required – to work for pay, as has long been the case for fathers and women without children. Yet even when they work full-time, most women still have disproportionate responsibility for household duties and family caregiving. In this new world, women are no longer explicitly denied equal opportunities, but their efforts as caregivers seem to garner less respect from public policies.

Rich Democracies Take Different Approaches

In today's advanced societies, citizens and policymakers expect both men and women to be employed. But beyond that, nations have taken very different approaches to furthering gender equality and helping families meet their needs:

- The United States has been a pioneer in encouraging women's employment through anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action initiatives by educational institutions and employers. But in social policy, the

United States has not been a leader. "Welfare reform," enacted in 1996, ended the entitlement to benefits paid to needy mothers not in the labor force. Poor mothers, like all other citizens, are now expected to look for work to support their families with wages. However, unless employers offer them, there may be few social benefits to support caregiving – such as paid parental leaves or child care.

- European countries often give such public benefits to working parents. The Nordic countries are pioneers in supporting employed mothers, and more recently have taken steps to encourage men and women alike to combine well-compensated work with family caregiving supported by paid leave and guaranteed time off work. Yet in a kind of mirror image to the United States, many European countries do relatively little to fight workplace discrimination or take active steps to promote women's careers.

How Can the U.S. Better Support Working Mothers?

The current U.S. approach to gender equality works relatively well for highly educated, well-paid professional women who have good health care and pensions through their employers and can afford to buy child care and home care services on the market. But American women who work for low pay, often in jobs without generous employment benefits, have a much harder time – especially if they are mothers on their own or in partnerships with men who earn little in the marketplace. Many critics worry that the demise of Aid to Families with Dependent Children was a backward step for low-income working mothers; and some go so far as to suggest that the United States should find new ways to pay wages to caregivers who work in the home.

Another approach would respond to the new realities of paid work and family caregiving by combining the best of European and U.S. policies. We are unlikely to return to a world in which adults of either gender can expect to be supported entirely apart from paid employment. Rather than pine for bygone days, it might be preferable to fight for adequate health care, educational opportunities, and paid family leave laws – all designed to help men and women combine paid employment with caregiving. To the degree that women are more hard-pressed than men by double-duties, women will benefit more from improved policies along these lines. The bottom line would be greater gender equality.

Following the end of the traditional welfare system, Democrats have achieved some halting progress toward "making work pay" and offering support to working parents. The Earned Income Tax Credit, Family and Medical Leave Act, children's health insurance, increases in the minimum wage, and subsidies for child care expenses – all have helped working mothers and fathers alike. In California and New Jersey, workers can take paid family leaves to attend to newly arrived children or seriously ill family members. All of these are steps toward adapting U.S. public provision to the new world where mothers as well as fathers are employed. But the United States still has a long way to go – especially to support less-privileged employed mothers.

Read more in Ann Shola Orloff, "From Maternalism to 'Employment for All': State Policies to Promote Women's Employment across the Affluent Democracies," in *The State after Statism: New State Activities in the Age of Liberalization*, edited by Jonah D. Levy (Harvard University Press, 2006), 230-68.