



Today, three-quarters of America's mothers help keep the economy humming as part of the nation's workforce. Yet our federal policies fail to harmonize with them. While women in other countries benefit from family-friendly policies — like subsidized child care and paid parental leave — working mothers in the United States are left far behind. Isn't it time to take care of the women who take care of us all?



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Audrey, a graduate of one of the nation's top veterinary schools, was giving a fat, white cat named Boomer an expert examination on a metal examining table. Down the hall, her colleague assessed another ailing animal. Although the two veterinarians shared similar educational and work backgrounds, there was one significant difference: pay. Audrey, the mother of two elementary-school-aged daughters, was making several dollars less per hour than her co-worker who, while also a woman, didn't have any children.

Audrey puts a face on the current wage gap confronting the 82 percent of American women who have children by the time they're 44 years old. And this wage gap isn't just between men and women. It's between mothers and non-mothers. Women without children make 90 cents to a man's dollar; moms make only 73 cents to the man's dollar, and single moms make 56 to 66 cents. The financial hits that mothers take pull down the average wages of all women.

Audrey's experience is part of a bigger problem that spans the economic spectrum. Welcome to the maternal wall. Mothers are 44 percent less likely to be hired than non-mothers for the same job, according to a 2005 study by Dr. Shelley Correll at Cornell University. The résumés used for the study were identical, except for a short biographical sentence that mentioned children. Dr. Correll's study also found that among those hired for high-salaried jobs, mothers are offered significantly lower starting pay. Study participants offered non-mothers an average of \$11,000 more than equally qualified mothers.

The hiring and wage discrimination mothers face has a tremendous impact on women and families. This is particularly true because nearly three-quarters of mothers in the United States now work, and most modern families need two paychecks to pay their bills. A full quarter of families with children under age six live in poverty, for example, and elderly women are more likely than their male counterparts to live in poverty because of a lifetime's worth of wage penalties.

One reason for the American maternal wage gap, Jane Waldfogel writes in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, "may be the institutional structure in the United States, which has emphasized equal pay and equal opportunity policies, but not family policies such as maternity leave and child care. Other industrialized countries that have implemented family policies along with their gender policies seem to have had better success at narrowing both the gender gap and the family gap."

Family-friendly policies such as paid family leave, subsidized child care, and universal health care have been shown to help close the maternal gap in other countries. Flexible work options that include all men and women are also important, to ensure that those taking advantage of the options aren't marginalized.

Motherhood in the United States is often marked by financial difficulty and time stretched too thin. In fact, research reveals that the birth of a baby is responsible for a full 25 percent of "poverty spells," or times when a family's income slips below what is needed for basic expenses like food and rent. Even those who do not end up struggling to feed their families must often make painful sacrifices to make ends meet.

Consider Selena, 27, who with her husband, James, had carefully crafted a financial strategy to accommodate the second child they were expecting. Like 61 percent of American families

A Global Perspective

163 countries guarantee paid maternity leave.

The US does not.

45 countries guarantee paid paternity leave.

The US does not.

76 countries ensure that mothers can take off time from work to breastfeed.

The US does not.

37 countries guarantee paid leave for children's health.

The US does not.

84 countries limit the maximum length of the work week.

The US does not.

Source: The Work, Family, and Equity Index, compiled by the Harvard School of Public Health's Project on Global Working Families.

with children, they relied on two paychecks to support their family. If Selena, 32 weeks pregnant, didn't take off any time during her pregnancy, she could use her accrued sick and vacation leave, followed by a week and a half of unpaid leave, for a total of three and a half weeks off after the birth.

But life threw the couple a curveball when Selena went into labor six weeks early. With her premature son's arrival came a tough decision. Both parents wanted Selena to have time to bond with her son, but they couldn't afford for her to take more time off than they had planned. So Selena, who had the baby on Thursday, was back at her desk Monday morning. "It was the hardest two and a half weeks of my life," she said.

It doesn't have to be this way. In most other countries, it isn't.

The United States lags behind when it comes to family-friendly policies and programs. And without such programs, many families struggle. Without any federal paid family leave, for example, many parents cannot afford the incredibly high costs of infant child care, which averages from \$4,000 to \$10,000 per year per child. It's worse for those who earn the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour: Working a 52-week full-time job without unpaid breaks, they earn only \$10,712 per year. Add in a lack of health-care coverage, and it's easy to see how families get stuck in a quagmire of economic strife.

Of the 168 countries studied in the Harvard School of Public Health's Project on Global Working Families, the United States is one of only four — with Papua New Guinea, Lesotho, and Swaziland — that doesn't mandate paid maternity leave. In 45 countries, fathers also are entitled to paid parental leave.

Sweden — with about a year of paid family leave, some specifically for fathers — is often used as the example of a model policy. Not surprisingly, as Ann Crittenden writes in *The Price of Motherhood*, "Swedish women on average have higher incomes, vis-à-vis men, than women anywhere else in the world." In countries with family-friendly policies in place, moms don't take such big wage hits or face so many heart-wrenching choices.

In America today, motherhood and employment are at a critical juncture. Our 21st-century economy is paired with an industrial-era support structure that simply cannot sustain it. It is long past time for our public policy and workplace structures to meet the challenges of the modern world. ➤

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WELFARE REFORM: NO VICTORY OVER POVERTY

In 1996, when President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act — better known as “welfare reform” — he described it as a “historic opportunity to end welfare as we know it ... by promoting the fundamental values of work, responsibility, and family.”

This sweeping legislation introduced the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and with it a maximum welfare coverage period of five years per lifetime. It shifted responsibilities to the states, and emphasized working for benefits. Critics contended that the bill would hurt, not help, poor women and their children. Proponents said it would transform a system of entitlement to a system of empowerment.

Ten years later, we can better evaluate how families in need have fared. Welfare caseloads fell sharply, by about 60 percent, from their peak in 1993. Most women who left welfare found jobs. And the poverty rate fell from 1996 through 2000, especially for families headed by single mothers. Proponents of welfare reform claimed success.

Yet welfare reform was not solely responsible for the economic gains of low-income families. In fact, welfare caseloads began their descent well before welfare reform. And after the legislation was enacted, other new laws were doing as much — or more — to help low-income families bridge the gap between earnings and needs. In 1996, for example, Congress raised the minimum wage, and in 1997, it expanded both the Earned Income Tax Credit and Medicaid. Together, these changes added about \$4,000 to the income of a single parent working full-time year-round.

Simultaneously, the United States was enjoying the best labor market for low-wage workers in more than a quarter-century, accounting for about a third of welfare caseload declines and most of the wage gains. Even so, the market failed to create good jobs for most former welfare recipients. For those leaving welfare in the late 1990s, wages averaged about \$7 or \$8 per hour. Further, most jobs did not come with health insurance or paid leave.

In the end, welfare reform did manage to help millions of low-income women go to work each day. Yet the jobs alone failed to lift them or their families out of poverty. Slow job growth and recent wage declines have also taken their toll. Since 2000, poverty has increased from 11.3 to 12.6 percent and family income for those in the bottom fifth of the income distribution has fallen by 5.5 percent for all families and 12.3 percent for African-American families.

Ten years after welfare reform transformed the fabric of one of the US's primary safety-net programs, many more are working, but too many are still barely making it. In the days ahead, forward-looking policies — such as paid family leave, universal health insurance, and a livable minimum wage — could make all the difference in promoting not only the values, but the realities of work, responsibility, and family. — Heather Boushey