



The work / family conflict faced by working mothers is not an accident or an inevitable cultural evolution: it's an outcome of bad policy.

## Who Pays for Today's Families?

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We've all heard quite enough by now of the Lawrence Summers debacle at Harvard. He hypothesized that the lack of progress for women in the sciences is attributable to women's innate abilities (or lack thereof); the "general clash between people's legitimate family desires" and employers' demand for long hours of work, or--less likely in his view--discrimination.

Although debate has raged over whether and how Dr. Summers should apologize for his comments, the sad truth is that women, and especially mothers, do continue to achieve less in the labor market, relative to their male peers.

The clash between family desires and employers' time demands is a form of labor market discrimination. Having (and caring for) a family is not a "choice" akin to preferences about other leisure activities. Caring labor is critical for the reproduction of our society; somebody has to do it and somebody has to pay for that time. The traditional answer has been for women to take on these burdens--without pay.

Most women, however, are no longer at home, available to provide care for free. Over the latter half of the 20th century, we saw a remarkable movement of mothers from the home into the paid labor force. The challenge of this generation will be to determine how our society will cope with this shift.

A generation ago, four out of every five families with children had two parents, and nearly half of those families had a full-time homemaker/caretaker. Today, fewer families--70 percent--have two parents, and among those only about a quarter have a stay-at-home caretaker. With the rise in single-parenthood and the increase in the employment of mothers, now less than one-in-five families with children have a full-time homemaker/caretaker.

More work leaves families experiencing a serious time crunch and--if popular media accounts are any indication--a collective feeling of constantly being "stressed out."

That work and family conflict is not an accident or an inevitable cultural evolution; it is the result of deliberate neglect of the needs of families in favor of the desire of employers to control workers' time.

Simply put, most jobs in the United States presume that the worker does not have family responsibilities. Hours are long and many jobs, even those dominated by women, such as nursing, require mandatory overtime.

Americans have viewed family care as a purely individual problem. Families cope with their longer hours of paid work by purchasing care rather than looking to broader solutions. Other nations have addressed these family care problems as social problems. Most nations mandate paid time off for maternity (and many also include paternity) and paid sick leave. These nations also often impose limits on work hours, unlike the United States.

The lack of policies to address care not only leaves families stressed, but it means that mothers continue to take on the burden of care. This is the cause of the pay and career achievement gap cited by Dr. Summers. While fathers earn more than men without children, mothers continue to earn less than women without children.

The pay and career achievement gap is due to the fact that jobs in the United States do not provide mothers--or fathers--with enough flexibility to be a good parent and a good worker.

Women have taken on the challenges of balancing work and family. Women are now not only more likely than men to graduate from high school, but college as well. Women are staying in the labor market longer, as well, making them a better "investment" for employers. As a result, the gender gap has nearly closed among the youngest workers: the ratio of women's wages to men's hovers around 95 percent for those age 18 to 25.

However, once those workers grow up a bit, the gender gap comes back in full force. Last year, women earned 76 cents for every dollar men earned. This gap only grows over time: over a 15-year period, women's earnings average 38 percent of men's.

Until there is a collective effort to solve the crisis of care, women will continue to bear that burden and each year we'll bemoan the pay and career achievement gaps.

However, it does not have to be this way. For example, we know that mothers who have access to leave earn more later on in their careers, both because they are able to go back to their jobs, but also because they are encouraged to stay employed, rather than drop out of the labor force.

Work and family clash because no one has forced these two systems to find a workable balance. Our challenge is not to simply note that women may be innately different, but to find ways to help parents be both breadwinners and caretakers.