

Preface



By John D. Podesta

Earlier this year, the Center for American Progress decided to closely examine the consequences of what we thought was a major tipping point in our nation’s social and economic history: the emergence of working women as primary breadwinners for millions of families at the same time that their presence on America’s payrolls grew to comprise fully half the nation’s workforce. In addition, we were watching the Great Recession amplify and accelerate these trends. We are in the midst of a fundamental transformation of the way America works and lives.

But my own interest wasn’t just academic. It sprang from a very personal source: my mother. My family wasn’t much like what we were watching on TV in the 1950s. My parents had a tag-team work life—my father working in a factory during the day; my mother in a pink-collar job from 5 p.m. until midnight. Like millions of families today, they juggled, struggled, nurtured, laughed a lot, and fought a little so that their kids could lead good lives and get ahead. I don’t think my mother ever really thought of herself as a trendsetter, but she was at the leading edge of a wave that shaped America in the last half of the 20th century—a wave we call “a woman’s nation.” Though she recently passed away, she still serves as a role model for my daughters.

So I was delighted when Maria Shriver, who cleverly conceived of the phrase “a woman’s nation,” came to me with the idea of combining a project she envisioned with CAP’s work and together producing a landmark examination of this

fundamental change in American society. We realized that Maria could add invaluable depth to the efforts underway because she recognized not only the enormous impact of these changes on the workplace, but their import for every aspect of the American life and culture, as well. A partnership was born, and it produced a document that goes far beyond the typical findings of your standard economic policy report.

This report brings together the relentless intellect of a Peabody and Emmy Award-winning journalist who pushes beyond statistics to fully reveal the complexity of women’s lives and the academic muscle of a progressive think tank that understands how to comb through data and illuminate the trends re-shaping the American landscape.

In the summer of 2009, Maria packed her bags and crisscrossed the country and, with her team, engaged in conversations with everyday women and men in Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Silicon Valley, hearing and understanding from both sexes how this cultural upheaval has changed their lives. Maria used the diverse voices she heard to stitch together the work CAP was doing.

CAP’s contribution—led by senior economist Heather Boushey, the leading authority on the study of working families and the U.S. labor market, and Ann O’Leary, a CAP senior fellow and executive director of the Berkeley Center for Health, Economic & Family Security—shines a light on America’s defining institutions. We examined government and businesses; faith, culture, and media; and our health care and educational institutions, and then we considered meaningful ways they can adapt to this sea change in Americans’ lives.

And the Rockefeller Foundation, which generously funded a nationwide poll in collaboration with *TIME*, conducted a comprehensive examination of American attitudes about the role of women in today’s world.

The result is an exhaustive, multifaceted report. CAP’s economic team commissioned work from a variety of scholars and experts. Maria inspired and assembled a collection of diverse, incisive, and illuminating essays and brought to us her conversations with dozens of Americans around the country. And then there is the landmark national poll that closes the report. Together, we’ve created a provocative study that we expect will spur a national conversation about what women’s emerging economic power means for our way of life.

When we look back over the 20th century and try to understand what's happened to workers and their families and the challenges they now face, the movement of women out of the home and into paid employment stands out as a unique and powerful transformation. Unlike the America our parents still remember and even helped to build, today:

- Moms aren't home all day caring for younger children, waiting for the cable guy or to pick up the kids from school, yet quality child care and flexible hours at work are in short supply.

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- Workplaces are no longer the domain of men. The last remnants of those days can scarcely be found at all, save on episodes of “Mad Men” or on “Leave it to Beaver” reruns. Women now comprise half the workers on employers' payrolls. And while men and women still tend to work in different kinds of jobs, most workers under 40 have never known a workplace without women bosses and women colleagues.
- Schools still let kids out in the afternoon, long before the workday ends, and they shut their doors for three months during the summer, even though the majority of families with children are supported by a single working parent or a dual-earning couple.
- Most workers—men and women—now have family responsibilities they negotiate daily with their spouses, family members, bosses, colleagues, and employees. But it is still a rare doctor's office that is open evenings or weekends, even though so many people work at all hours in our 24/7 economy.

Women becoming primary breadwinners or co-breadwinners changed everything. But, even though we were all witness to this phenomenon's slow emergence over many years, these changes seem somehow to have snuck up on us. As a result, our policy landscape remains stuck in an idealized past, where the typical family was composed of a married-for-life couple with a full-time breadwinner and full-time homemaker who raised the children herself.

Government policies and laws continue to rely on an outdated model of the American family. And, despite the existence of innovative practices in corporate America, most employers fail to acknowledge or accommodate the daily juggling act their workers perform, they are oblivious to the fact that their employees are now more likely to be women, and they ignore the fact that men now share in domestic duties.

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Slow, too, have been our institutions of faith in recognizing this transformation of male-female dynamics at a time when increasingly urgent lives make spiritual support more needed—and, perhaps, less available—than ever before.

And the media present flawed images of the real challenges women face, embracing glamour, power, and sex while ignoring the daily struggle to raise children and pay bills.

At one level, everything has changed. And yet so much more change is needed. This report contemplates what a new America should look like after we finally embrace this important new dynamic in our lives and the changes it has caused in our homes and businesses.

At CAP, our work builds upon the progressive ideals of leaders who brought needed change to our national life, people such as Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and Martin Luther King. We draw from the great social movements of the 20th century, from labor rights and worker safety to civil rights and women's suffrage.

“A Woman's Nation Changes Everything” is work in the best tradition of those ideals. It flips a switch in our culture, sparking a collective acknowledgement of the interdependence of men and women today. With that switch we hope will come changes in the collective mindset of our government, business, faith institutions, our culture, media, and most importantly, men and women. Embracing these new dynamics and sparking new conversations is what “A Woman's Nation Changes Everything” is all about.

But this report is only the beginning of that conversation. In the months and years to come, we at the Center for American Progress hope you will join us in our efforts to transform our ideas into actual policies that make the world around us work better for families—as they really are. We hope you enjoy this report and that you'll join us on the road ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John D. Podesta". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "P".

John D. Podesta, President and CEO,
Center for American Progress