



Our Working Nation

How Working Women Are Reshaping America's Families and Economy and What It Means for Policymakers

A Policy Roadmap

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A call to action

This fall, the Center for American Progress together with Maria Shriver published a major report on the historic transformation of the American worker and the American workforce: *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything*. That report explored three key transformations in our families, our workplaces, and our entire society.

First, women now make up half of all workers in the United States, a threshold never reached before in the history of our nation.

Second, mothers are now primary breadwinners—making as much or more than their spouse or doing it all on their own—in nearly 4 in 10 families. If you add mothers who are co-breadwinners—contributing at least a quarter of the family income—*The Shriver Report* found that two-thirds of mothers are breadwinners or co-breadwinners in their families. While women of color and lower-income women have always worked in substantial numbers, the last few decades have shown striking increases in women's work across all racial and income groups.

These developments alone are a dramatic shift from the late 1960s, when women were one-third of the workers in the United States, and just over a quarter were breadwinners or co-breadwinners in their families. But not only has our workforce changed. Today, the very makeup of our families is dramatically different than it was in the mid-1970s when women began entering the workforce in larger numbers.

The Shriver Report explored this third key transformation, too. In 1975, nearly half of families with children consisted of a male breadwinner and a female homemaker. Today, that number is just one in five families. In 1975, single parents made up only 1 in 10 of our families with children. Today, single-parent households are one in five of our families with children.

In *The Shriver Report*, top-notch academic and policy experts from around the country examined how the major institutions in our society—government, our health and education systems, business, faith-based institutions, and the media—are responding to these key changes in our society and where they fall short. In each instance, the authors of the report find that our institutions are not adequately keeping up with these changes.

But we also found that there is an appetite among men and women for institutions to address this reality. Our poll, conducted with the Rockefeller Foundation and Time Inc., confirmed that overwhelming majorities of both men and women said that government and businesses need to adapt by providing flexible work schedules, better childcare, and paid family and medical leave. Both men and women agreed that businesses that did not adapt would be left behind.

The Center for American Progress believes these new workplace and family dynamics need to be recognized and become central tenets of our nation's progressive domestic and economic policy priorities. Policymakers and the public are hungry for real, detailed solutions to address this transformation of "Our Working Nation," which not incidentally is the title of this report. In it, CAP offers solutions that go to the heart of our country's social and economic policies.

This policy roadmap is written in response to the plea for detailed, specific solutions that will help American workers and families meet the dual demands of work and family and, in turn, will strengthen our economy and the well-being of our families and our children. In the pages that follow, we outline a set of policies that address the needs of today's workers and working families as they really are, not as we imagine them to be. We focus on four key areas where we believe we need to make the most important changes:

- Updating basic labor standards to account for the fact that most workers also have family responsibilities by instituting predictable and flexible workplace schedules, ensuring that workers have access to paid family and medical leave, and establishing the right to paid sick days for all workers
- Improving basic fairness in our workplace by ending discrimination against all workers, including pregnant women and caregivers
- Providing direct support to working families with childcare and eldercare needs
- Improving our knowledge about family responsive workplace policies by collecting national data on work-life policies offered by employers and analyzing the effectiveness of existing state and local policies

This is a popular and doable agenda. Men and women of all political stripes are united in their desire to see the government and business update workplace policies in response to the needs of today's workers and families. But this desire isn't just part of a long wish list. These issues are essential to stabilizing the middle class and improving our economy. Businesses are more profitable when they adopt these policies, and families are more economically stable when they have access to workplace flexibility, paid family leave, and caregiving support.

To move these issues forward, we provide ideas for policymakers at all levels of government. The Obama administration, for example, should do more with its executive power to institute family-friendly workplace policies in our nation's federal workforce and in the vast workforce of federal contractors and grantees. Congress is already engaged in proposing family-friendly reforms, including introducing legislation on paid sick days, paid family and medical leave and workplace flexibility, but our legislators should move forward with these proposals.

So too could states and localities. Several states are leading the way by enacting paid family and medical leave, but more could be done at the state level while they await federal action. Finally, local governments also can serve as a laboratory for developing innovative workplace policies that are smart for business, smart for workers and smart for families. San Francisco and Washington, D.C. have led the way in this area by enacting paid sick days for their workers, and voters in Milwaukee have approved paid sick days (but enactment of the voter initiative is on hold pending a challenge in court). Still, other cities need to begin to act.

We also stress in this report that businesses do not need to wait for government action to institute family responsive workplace policies. In *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything*, we highlighted a number of businesses that are leading the way in creating workplaces that truly meet the needs of today's workers. Business leaders can use this report as a guide to the type of policies and practices workers need and that, in the end, will make them more profitable and more competitive in the global marketplace.

In short, "Our Working Nation" challenges policymakers at all government levels and business leaders to consider the facts about the makeup of today's workers and working families and then enact progressive policies to help them become better workers and caregivers—improving our economy and our society along the way. These are lofty goals worthy of a new progressive era in our nation's history.

– John Podesta, president and chief executive officer of the Center for American Progress

Introduction and summary

When we look back over the 20th century and try to understand what's happened to American workers and their families, the movement of women out of the home and into paid employment stands out as one of the most important transformations. Women are now half of all workers on U.S. payrolls, two-thirds of mothers are bringing home at least a quarter of the family's earnings, and 4 in 10 mothers are either the sole breadwinner (a single, working mother) or are bringing home as much or more than their spouse (see Figure 1).¹ This increase in women's workforce participation and contribution to the family income has been dramatic across all racial and class lines, but is particularly striking among low-income women who are now primary breadwinners in two-thirds of their families.

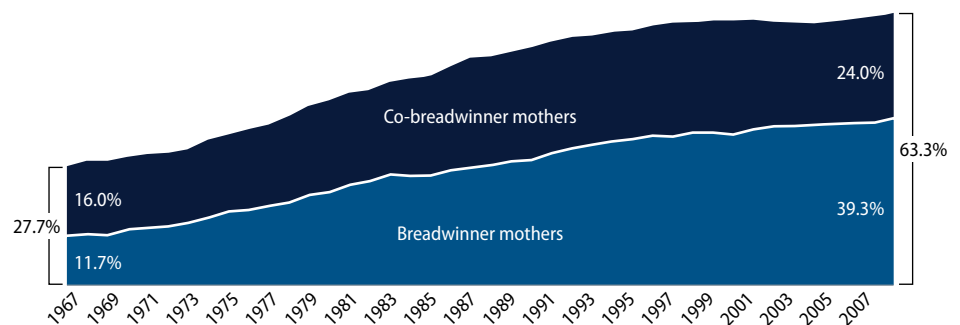
The movement of women into employment has transformed how we work and live. Yet government, business, educational, and other social institutions all around us are not keeping pace. Consider these everyday realities faced by so many families across the nation:

Inside the home, the majority of families no longer have someone to deal with life's everyday humdrum details or emergencies—from helping the kids with homework to doing the grocery shopping, or from being home for a sudden home repair emergency to picking up a sick child from school or taking an ailing parent to the doctor.

Workplaces are no longer the domain of men: Women are now half (49.9 percent) of employees on employer's payrolls.² While most men and women continue to work in different kinds of jobs, most workers under 40 today have never known a workplace without women

FIGURE 1
The new workforce

Share of mothers who are breadwinners or co-breadwinners, 1967 to 2008



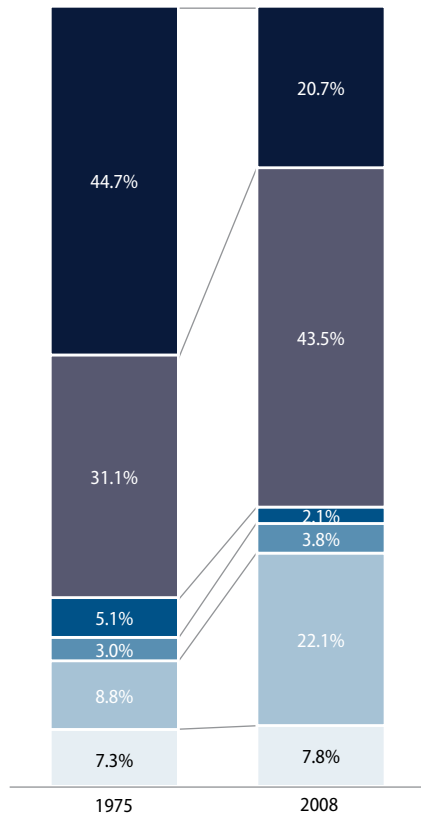
Source: Heather Boushey and Jeff Chapman's analysis of Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, Trent Alexander, Donna Leicach, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 2.0. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Population Center [producer and distributor], 2009.

Notes: Breadwinner mothers include single mothers who work and married mothers who earn as much or more than their husbands. Co-breadwinners are wives who bring home at least 25 percent of the couple's earnings, but less than half. The data only include families with a mother who is between the ages of 18 and 60 and who has children under age 18 living with her.

FIGURE 2
The new normal

Changes in family structure and work, families with children under age 18, 1975 and 2008

- Married, traditional (only husband employed)
- Married, dual earner
- Married, both parents unemployed
- Married, non-traditional (only wife employed)
- Single parent, employed
- Single parent, unemployed



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic News Release: Table 4. Families with own children: Employment status of parents by age of youngest child and family type, 2007-08 annual averages; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Indicator 18: Parent's Employment, Employment status of parents with own children under 18 years old, by type of family: 1975 to 1993.

bosses and women colleagues. Yet the vast majority of workplaces are still structured as though all workers have a stay-at-home spouse to deal with family needs.

Schools still let children out in the afternoon long before the workday ends and close for three months during the summer—even though the majority of families with children are comprised of either a single working parent or a dual-earning couple.

Most workers—men and women—now have family responsibilities that they must negotiate with their spouses, family members, bosses, colleagues, and employees, as well as the institutions around them, such as the childcare center or a doctor's office that doesn't have evening or weekend hours—even though so many people work odd hours in our 24/7 economy. Yet many workers have little power in negotiating their schedules with their employer, especially in nonunion settings.

The federal government has not updated its policies to aid families to reflect these new realities in the workplace and in the home. And the laws we do have on the books—the provision of unpaid, job-protected leave offered by the Family and Medical Leave Act and the prohibition against sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act—don't fully meet the needs of today's workers, especially lower-income workers.³ Nor to any great degree have state and local governments updated their laws to address these problems. Yet this is one of the most significant policy challenges of the 21st century. Policymakers need to re-evaluate the values and assumptions underlying our nation's workplace policies to ensure that they reflect the actual—not outdated or imagined—ways that families work and care for their loved ones today.

Decades ago, the most common family consisted of a breadwinner husband and a stay-at-home wife (see Figure 2). While even then that did not describe the majority of families—and families of color have long been more likely to have working mothers—now, this is not even the most common type of family. Instead, there is a flowering of a variety of kinds of families. The marriage rate is currently at the lowest point in its recorded history,⁴ and divorce remains a steady presence in the lives of many families.⁵ More than one in five families with children is headed by a single parent.⁶ There are approximately 770,000 same-sex couples living in the United States, 20 percent of whom are raising children.⁷ This poses challenges for policymakers who must craft policies that meet the needs of all these kinds of families, not only the minority of families that look like “traditional” families.

Perhaps one of the biggest underreported implications of this transformation is the impact on men. No longer do men always bear the full burden of earning the majority of the family's finances, but they are now more likely to have—and want—to take time off work to attend to their family. With most mothers contributing to the family's budget, there are relatively few families with a full-time stay-at-home wife. Men and women are now left to negotiate the challenges of work-family conflict, such as who will go in to work late to take an elderly family member to the doctor or stay home with a sick child. Given this, it comes as no surprise that men in dual-earner couples today are reporting even more work-family conflict than women.⁸

In the United States, our policies more often than not implicitly assume that families have someone at home that provides care and can deal with school hours that are inconsistent with workday patterns or hospitals that send home recovering patients who need assistance. Many of our workplaces put no limits on mandatory overtime, do not require employers to provide predictable schedules, and discipline employees for even asking to talk with their employer about the kinds of workplace flexibility they need to cope with the complexities of modern family life. This is no way to run an economy and care for the next generation of Americans.

Americans are hungering for change. Our poll conducted for *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything* shows that most Americans agree that women working is good for the economy and society, and most also agree that our institutions need to embrace this new reality. A full 85 percent of Americans agree that businesses that fail to adapt to the needs of modern families risk losing good workers.⁹ This includes 84 percent of men, 87 percent of women and 91 percent of liberals, and 80 percent of conservatives (see Figure 3).¹⁰

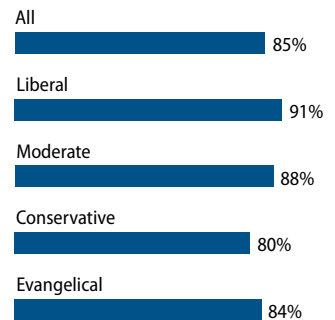
This report outlines a policy agenda that addresses the needs of today's workers and families as they really are, not as we imagine them to be. The agenda is inclusive and focuses on policies that we believe have the most political saliency and for which advocates can build a broad coalition of support. The policy agenda laid out here explicitly focuses on ensuring that workers from across the income strata and in all kinds of families can make use of these policies and that the agenda will lead to a marked improvement in the ability of families to manage work-family conflict.¹¹ But while this report outlines key policies, it is not an exhaustive list. We focus on four key areas where we believe we need to make the most important changes:

- Updating basic labor standards to account for the fact that most workers also have family responsibilities by instituting predictable and flexible workplace schedules, ensuring that workers have access to paid family and medical leave, and establishing the right to paid sick days for all workers

FIGURE 3

Q: Businesses that fail to adapt to the needs of modern families risk losing good workers: strongly or somewhat agree

By identity



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll commissioned by the Center for American Progress and Maria Shriver, 2009.

We can improve our economy's productivity, our businesses' global economic competitiveness, and our society's ability to care for our children, our sick, and our elderly. These are 21st century reforms that simply must be enacted.

- Improving basic fairness in our workplace by ending discrimination against all workers, including pregnant women and caregivers
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These recommendations are not just good policy; they are good politics. They have a broad, cross-cutting base of support and can be crafted to work for workers in all kinds of families; not only for professional workers, but for middle- and low-income workers as well.

Some will question whether this is the right time to address these issues, given that the U.S. unemployment rate remains near 10 percent. For employers, one of the key findings from research over the past couple of decades has been that failing to address work-family conflict hampers productivity, primarily through increasing costly employee turnover. What employers need to recognize is that the worker with care responsibilities or the need for flexibility is no longer the exception, but is now the rule.

Management styles that can rise to the challenge of finding workable solutions to this problem will see the benefits in the bottom line. As employers, both public and private, look to implementing more part-time work and furloughs due to the Great Recession, this provides them with opportunities to experiment with policies on reduced hours, of which there is now a large literature on “best practices.”¹²

This agenda lays out a vision that addresses a challenge that has been a half century in the making. A key piece signaling recovery from the Great Recession will be seeing real growth in family incomes. But addressing the time squeeze and stresses of life for working families—all of them—will not happen until we address their work-family conflicts. And this will remain a potent political issue longer after the recession turns into a solid recovery.

We hope these progressive recommendations will help policymakers see the wisdom and political saliency of enacting reforms that match the needs of our workplaces with the needs of our families. We can improve our economy's productivity, our businesses' global economic competitiveness, and our society's ability to care for our children, our sick, and our elderly. These are 21st century reforms that simply must be enacted.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

