



Families That Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment

Janet C. Gornick, Marcia K. Meyers

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Parents around the world grapple with the common challenge of balancing work and child care. Despite common problems, the industrialized nations have developed dramatically different social and labor market policies—policies that vary widely in the level of support they provide for parents and the extent to which they encourage an equal division of labor between parents as they balance work and care. In *Families That Work*, Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers take a close look at the work-family policies in the United States and abroad and call for a new and expanded role for the U.S. government in order to bring this country up to the standards taken for granted in many other Western nations.

In many countries in Europe and in Canada, family leave policies grant parents paid time off to care for their young children, and labor market regulations go a long way toward ensuring that work does not overwhelm family obligations. In addition, early childhood education and care programs guarantee access to high-quality care for their children. In most of these countries, policies encourage gender equality by strengthening mothers' ties to employment and encouraging fathers to spend more time caregiving at home. In sharp contrast, Gornick and Meyers show how in the United States—an economy with high labor force participation among both fathers and mothers—parents are left to craft private solutions to the society-wide dilemma of “who will care for the children?” Parents—overwhelmingly mothers—must loosen their ties to the workplace to care for their children; workers are forced to negotiate with their employers, often unsuccessfully, for family leave and reduced work schedules; and parents must purchase care of dubious quality, at high prices, from consumer markets. By leaving child care solutions up to hard-pressed working parents, these private solutions exact a high price in terms of gender inequality in the workplace and at home, family stress and economic insecurity, and—not least—child well-being. Gornick and Meyers show that it is possible—based on the experiences of other countries—to enhance child well-being and to increase gender equality by promoting more extensive and egalitarian family leave, work-time, and child care policies.

Families That Work demonstrates convincingly that the United States has much to learn from policies in Europe and in Canada, and that the often-repeated claim that the United States is simply “too different” to draw lessons from other countries is based largely on misperceptions about policies in other countries and about the possibility of policy expansion in the United States.

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