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Our Working Nation in 2013

An Updated National Agenda for Work and Family Policies

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Introduction and summary

In October 2009 the Center for American Progress teamed up with then-First Lady of California Maria Shriver to release *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything*.¹ *A Woman's Nation* provided a comprehensive look at how our social institutions—from government to businesses to faith-based institutions—had responded to women's entry into the workforce at a time when women had just become half of the workers in the United States. Following on the heels of that report, in early 2010 the Center for American Progress released “*Our Working Nation: How Working Women Are Reshaping America's Families and Economy and What It Means for Policymakers*,”² which provided a road map for policymakers to address the outdated and antiquated ways in which our government and our employers treat workers.

Since the release of our report, President Barack Obama and his administration have successfully used the bully pulpit to bring attention to the need for greater workplace flexibility. The president and first lady hosted a White House Flexibility Forum in March 2010, releasing a Council of Economic Advisers report on the economics of workplace flexibility.³ The Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor, together with the White House Council on Women and Girls, followed up by hosting regional forums across the country as part of a “National Dialogue on Workplace Flexibility.”⁴ And the Senate also used its megaphone by hosting a hearing on the issue of how to help the middle class balance work and family. But apart from raising awareness and framing the issue, there has been no action at the national level to update basic labor standards or improve workplace fairness through legislative or administrative policies that would better support workers who are responsible for both earning the family income and providing care to family members.

That is why as President Obama enters his second term and as the 113th Congress convenes—with historic numbers of women members—we have decided to re-release “*Our Working Nation*.” It is a road map of how we can update our workplace policies to fully include women and men who combine work with family care. We have updated the report with new data and a fresh look at how these changes can be made.

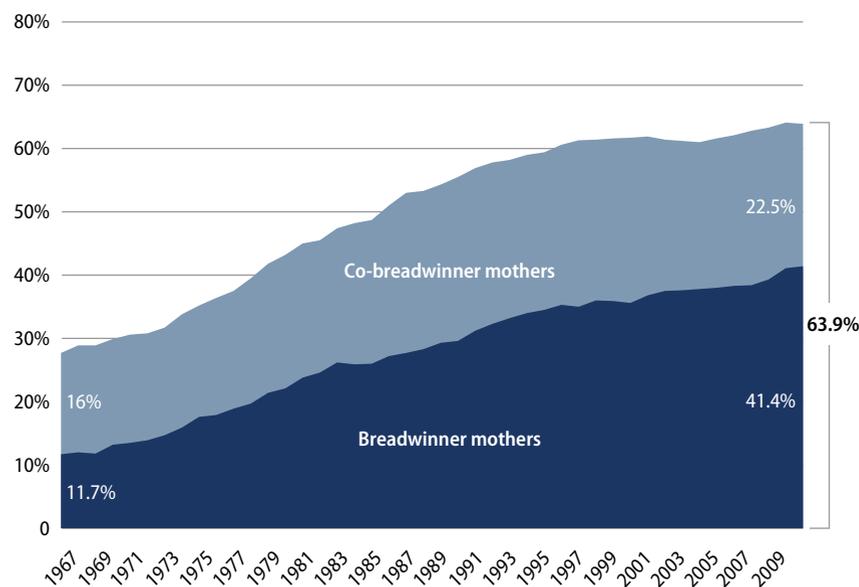
The world changed dramatically over the course of the 20th century, and the movement of women out of the home and into the paid labor force stands out as one of the most important transformations to American workers and families. Women are now half of all workers on U.S payrolls. The majority of mothers are employed outside the home. Most mothers are employed full time, and they are making significant contributions to the family income. 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.⁵ (see Figure 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 approximately two-thirds of their families.⁶

The movement of women into paid 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 half (49.3 percent) of employees on employer’s payrolls.⁷ 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
Share of mothers who are breadwinners or co-breadwinners, 1967 to 2010



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.

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 child care center or a doctor's office that doesn't have evening or weekend hours—even though so many people work all kinds of hours in our 24/7 economy.⁸ These responsibilities include not only caring for children but increasingly caring for an aging generation as well. 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.⁹ State and local governments have made some progress in updating their laws to address these problems. Since our previous report, one state (Connecticut) and one city (Seattle) enacted laws requiring employers to offer a minimum amount of earned sick time,¹⁰ but these laws cover only approximately 3 percent of the U.S. labor force, and the progress is slow in expanding to other jurisdictions.¹¹

Updating our nation's labor standards 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. This agenda is even more critical in this time of sustained unemployment and budget cutbacks. In order to get our economy back on track we need to make sure that workers can fully participate in the labor force, and decades of research show that policies that update labor standards can do just that.

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

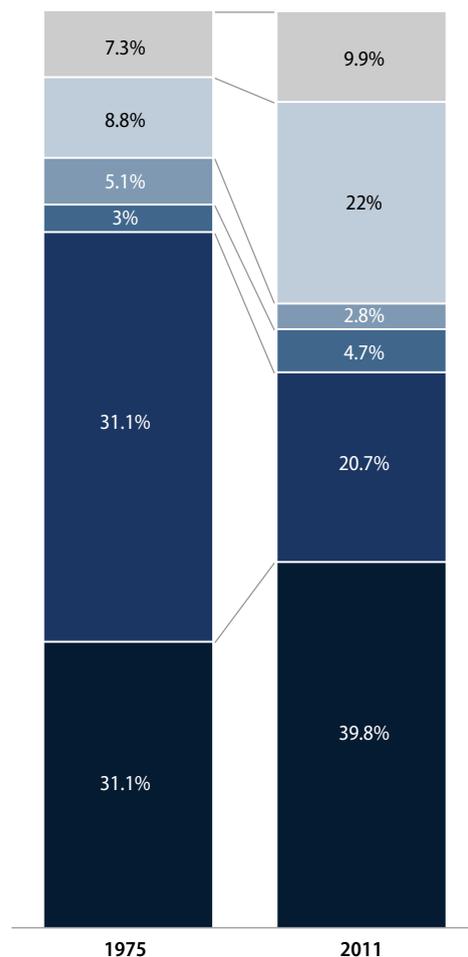
majority of families—and families of color have long been more likely to have working mothers—now, this is not even the most common type of family. Instead, there is a flowering of a variety of kinds of families. The marriage rate is currently at the lowest point in its recorded history; women and men who do marry are doing so later in life than ever before; and divorce remains a steady presence in the lives of many families.¹² Single parents head more than one in five families with children, and more than half of births to women under age 30 are to single mothers.¹³ 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. While the foretelling of the “end of men” is attention grabbing and thought provoking, the truth is that while gender roles have changed dramatically over the course of the past 40 years, the institutions around us continue to presume that most workers have a stay-at-home caregiver.¹⁴ Men’s lives today do not look like the lives of their fathers, but this does not mean that women are now the ones on top. 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 more likely than women to report experiencing work-family conflict.¹⁵

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 work-day 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

FIGURE 2
Changes in family structure and work, families with children under age 18, 1975 and 2011

- Married, dual earner
- Married, traditional (only husband employed)
- Married, non-traditional (only wife employed)
- Married, both parents unemployed
- 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, 2010-11 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.

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 hungry for change. In a bipartisan poll conducted on Election Day in November for the National Partnership for Women and Families, voters across party lines reported that they are experiencing hardship in meeting work, family, and personal responsibilities, and overwhelmingly have a desire for the president and Congress to address these issues. In fact, 73 percent of Republicans, 87 percent of Independents, and 96 percent of Democrats said congressional and presidential attention to family-friendly policies is important.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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 earned sick time 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 child care and elder care 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

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 work-

ers in all kinds of families—single and married parents, as well as those workers without children who have other family responsibilities such as caring for aging parents—and would benefit not only professional workers but middle- and low-income workers as well.

Voters in Connecticut elected Gov. Dan Malloy (D) partly based on his support of earned sick time legislation—legislation that he signed into law in 2011—and national candidates seem to believe these issues will garner them votes as well.¹⁸ In an internal analysis of the 2012 elections, the Center for American Progress looked at which candidates focused on policies to address work-family conflict in their campaigns, as measured by voicing support for such policies on their campaign website. We found among candidates in races defined as “competitive” by the Cook Political Report, that those who voiced support for these issues were more likely to win their race, although the result was not statistically significant.¹⁹ Combined with polling on the public’s support for these issues, this shows that support for an agenda that helps families in their daily lives could be compelling at the ballot box.

Some will question whether this is the right time to address these issues, given that the U.S. unemployment rate continues to hover at just below 8 percent. For employers, one of the key findings from research over the past few decades has been that failing to address work-family conflict hampers productivity, primarily through increasing costly employee turnover. Higher employment rates can help boost tax revenues, which in turn can help pay for the kinds of supports that working families need to care for their families. 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.

This agenda lays out a vision that addresses a challenge that has been a half-century in the making. 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.”

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