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## Why social policy hurts women in the workplace

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Since Kerry Devine, 32, and her friends began having children, she has noticed a stark difference between her female friends in Auburn, Wash., where she lives, and those in England and Cyprus, where she grew up. In the United States, they almost all stopped working outside the home, at least until their children were in school. Yet, she says, she can't think of a friend in Europe who left work after her children were born.

Devine quit her job after she had her first child, a girl, four years ago, because she thought 12 weeks of maternity leave was too short. "I just didn't want to leave her in day care or pay for the expenses of it," she said. When she gave birth to twin boys this year, a return to work — she had been a property manager for apartment buildings — looked even less plausible.

Her story would have played out differently, she said, if she had been living in her native England. Like many European countries, Britain offers a year of maternity leave, much of it paid, and protections for part-time workers, among other policies aimed at keeping women employed.

"I would have been okay putting a 1-year-old baby in day care, but not a 12-week-old," Devine said. "More flexible hours and being able to work from home part of the time definitely would have made a big difference."

Her thinking is shared by many American women — and plays a role in a significant economic reversal. As recently as 1990, the United States had one of the top employment rates in the world for women, but it has now fallen behind many European countries. After climbing for six decades, the percentage of women in the American workforce peaked in 1999, at 74 percent for women between 25 and 54. It has fallen since, to 69 percent today.

In many other countries, however, the percentage of working women has continued to climb. Switzerland, Australia, Germany and France now outrank the United States in prime-age women's labor force participation, as do Canada and Japan.



While the downturn and the weak economy of recent years have eliminated many of the jobs women held, a lack of family-friendly policies also appears to have contributed to the lower rate. In a *New York Times*/CBS News/Kaiser Family Foundation poll of nonworking adults aged 25 to 54 in the United States, 61 percent of women said family responsibilities were a reason they weren't working, compared with 37 percent of men. Of women who identify as homemakers and have not looked for a job in the past year, nearly three-quarters said they would consider going back if a job offered flexible hours or allowed them to work from home.

The poll also showed a stark difference between the experiences of nonworking women and men. Although the numbers of both have risen in the past 15 years, many more women appear to be in a better position to re-enter the workforce. Women are much more likely to have left their last job voluntarily and less likely to say they suffer from health problems that keep them from working.

But the experience of not working is also considerably more positive for women than men, the poll shows, which means that women are often not desperate to return to work. Women are more likely to say that not working has improved their romantic relationships, while men are more likely to say those relationships have suffered. Women who aren't working spend more time exercising than they once did. Men spend less.

Still, many women also seem interested in working again — under the right conditions. And near the top of the list of those requirements is the flexibility to avoid upending their family life. Many fewer women than men said they would be willing to take a job with trade-offs that might significantly affect their lives: moving to a different city, commuting more than an hour each way, or working nontraditional hours. Notably, women with children at home account for many of the differences. Women without children often have attitudes about unemployment that are more similar to men's, the poll shows.

For many women with children, it seems, the decision about work involves weighing a particularly complex set of benefits and drawbacks. And often the challenge is insurmountable in part because there is a dearth of programs and policies in the United States to support women in their prime career and childbearing years. In Europe, meanwhile, such policies have continued to expand and evolve in recent years. They include subsidized child care, generous parental leaves and taxation of individuals instead of families, which encourages women's employment. Social acceptance of working motherhood has also made a difference in countries like France, where the birthrate has risen even as more women enter the workforce.

"Equality, both in the larger society, but also in the family, seems to be advanced by having women work outside the home," said Francine Blau, an economist at Cornell University.

That is not to say, however, that Europe has achieved workplace equality. The same policies that enable women to work in large numbers can also hold them back from reaching senior-level jobs. They become stuck in part-time work or fall behind during long leaves. Women are less likely to work in the United States, according to Blau's research, but when they do, they tend to be more successful.

The steepest declines in workforce participation were among unmarried, childless women. They are more likely to be young and unskilled, the people for whom job opportunities are scarcest regardless of sex, said Robert Moffitt, an economist at Johns Hopkins University.

But the reversal in the employment rate of prime-age women, most of whom have children, has been more surprising.

At the upper end of the economic ladder, said Pamela Stone, a sociologist at Hunter College who studies gender and employment, the rapid increase in hours "has made it tough, and at the same time we have seemingly unending pressures on parents."

Among less-educated and lower-income women, the stresses of trying to work and raise children are particularly

challenging.

"It's tougher and tougher for women to make it worthwhile to work," Stone said. "For low- and middle-income families, it literally isn't worth going to work if the cost of child care exceeds what you'd bring in, and that calculus is exacerbated in an economic downturn."

Of American women who are not working, according to the *New York Times*/CBS/Kaiser poll, 17 percent did not graduate from high school and 77 percent did not graduate from college. Just 7 percent have a graduate degree.

Nearly a third of the relative decline in women's labor-force participation in the United States, compared with European countries, can be explained by Europe's expansion of policies like paid parental leave, part-time work and child care and the lack of those policies in the United States, according to a study by Blau and Lawrence Kahn, also of Cornell. Had the United States had the same policies, they calculated, women's labor-force participation rate would have been 7 percentage points higher by 2010.

Raquell Heredia, who is 27 and lives in Fontana, Calif., is an example. She is not working but wishes she were. "I just like working with people," she said. "I like being able to provide for my family."

After she became pregnant two years ago, she had severe morning sickness. She had no sick leave and had to quit her job as a waitress and bartender. When her first child, who is now 9, was born, she was working at a pharmacy, but left because it provided little maternity leave and no place to pump breast milk.

"I think that they should make it a lot easier, like for parents to have holidays off with their kids," she said.

Women in France, meanwhile, tell a different story. In numerous interviews, they said the system supported them as they tried to keep their careers after having children.

"If you want to work full time, everything is there in France to make that possible," said Abbey Ansart, 36, a strategic consultant at an American software company in Paris who has three children. "I couldn't have had the career in the U.S. that I have here."

Like every mother in France, Delphine Dubost, a public school teacher in Paris, was required to take a month and a half off before the births of her children. She was also able to take two and a half months of maternity leave afterward, all while receiving her full paycheck. After her second child, the law permitted her to work 80 percent of full time without a salary cut. She enrolled her children in France's state-run day care system where, for about \$740 a month, children receive organic meals and even diapers. "It was great," she said. "You can keep working, but can also spend time with your children."

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