

Family and Work: Challenges to Labor, Management and Government

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Family and Work

Challenges to Labor, Management and Government

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Many changes have taken place over this century, but none more radical than the changes in two of our basic institutions: family and work. Let me try a few catchwords as outlines to the parameters of change. For work, let me say: «shorter hours» — a reduction from 60 to 40 per week or less; «service-oriented economy» — the change first in about 1930 from agriculture as the center of production to manufacturing, and then the change about 1958 from manufacturing to service; «the influx of women into the labor market» — first, in the wars, but that was followed by an immediate retreat from the market with the resulting «baby boom», and then beginning in the mid-50s a return of women to the field of waged work, so that by the end of the 50s as many women were working as had worked during the war and their proportion of the labor force soon excelled the war figure. Today women make up 44% of the workforce and their numbers continue to grow. A large part of this phenomenon, moreover, is made up of married women and today in most industrialized countries well over half of all married women are working, including about 40% of those married women with children under three years of age.

One thing that has not changed in the world of work is the degree of sex segregation, so that women work mainly at jobs and in occupations predominated by women, and these are relatively few in terms of the total number of occupations. Women are employed in something like 28 of over 500 occupations listed in the *Dictionary of Occupations*. Thus the vast majority of women who are working are in «women's work». That means they are low paid, have low promotional ceilings, and little if any promotional outlook.

• COOK, Alice, Professor Emeritus, Cornell University.

Now let me offer a few descriptive phrases for the modern family. «Low birthrate» — in most developed countries now below reproduction and declining; «high divorce rate» — resulting in serial marriages and most children growing up in a separated family, headed either by a single parent or with a step-parent. Economically, families are now in the majority described as «two-earner», or «dual-career», in which women are working for economic reasons — i.e., to help meet expenses and allow the family to own its own home, be near good schools, send children to college and professional school; «double burden», a characterization of the life of the working wife and mother who still carries major responsibility for home and children along with responsibility for a job — with the result, that a great many women seek «part-time work», work that can be done at home, and above all, some solution to the problem of «child care». Marriages are now described in previously unheard of terms: «commuter marriage», a variation on «dual career»; «partnership marriage», a well-intentioned though seldom realized consequence of the «dual career marriage».

The concepts with which many of us grew up and prepared for careers and/or marriage had none of these terms in them and little realization of their significance. For many people in education, policy-making, and the world of work, these 19th century concepts are still guiding principles. These concepts were based on catchwords of their own, among them: «male head of household», or «breadwinner», «home and mother», «the good housewife», «domestic virtues», «momism», «going out to work», vs. «staying at home», «managing the house».

These definitions and allusions added up to seeing work as taking place outside the home in the public sphere. By contrast, the home was private and protected from the greed, brutality, avarice and exhaustion of work. It was a haven to which the weary male worker returned for rest and rehabilitation. Parental roles were very different and were sex determined and sex segregated. Mother had the main responsibility for ethics, affection, kinship and all that might be meant by «family ties and family maintenance». Father took care of ultimate discipline where mother was too weak or too loving to be fully effective. Father earned the family's livelihood. Marriage was lifelong even when the adventure and affection had entirely gone out of it. Father controlled the family. Indeed it was his property under family law. If he had to move or chose to move, the family of course moved. If he lost his job, the family was destitute. If he joined a union, the family was pro-labor. Mother went to work only if she was a widow, or her husband was incapacitated or alcoholic. When she «went out to work», she took a job at «women's work». She did not earn much, nor did she expect to. Her oldest son took on his father's responsibilities as soon as

he could, often at a very young age. In a word, the family was what the Germans call a «heile Welt», a world that was healthy and at the same time sanctified. That kind of world dies hard within us. Whether it was as orderly and «right» as it has been made to sound is not the challenge. The challenge lies in the fact that all is changed. That world will never return and we face very new definitions of work and family.

Given these premises about men's place and women's place, they meant that men were engaged in production, women in reproduction. The male worker could be expected to be fully devoted to the demands of work, for this wife was fully responsible for his family and for his care and feeding. He could devote himself fully to the demands of his employer during the hours he was paid to work, and what he did outside the workplace was his own affair unless he occupied himself in his «leisure hours» in such a way that he was unfit for work. In any case, the demands of home and family must not penetrate the shop or office. The worker to the extent that he could make demands upon his employer in the name of family, asked for a «family wage», enough to feed and clothe not only himself but his wife and children, for they were totally dependent on him.

When women worked outside the home, they were presumed to be single, for married women didn't and shouldn't work. They deserved no more than a woman's wage, because they weren't responsible for a family. If married women had to work, they could not be expected to devote themselves fully to the demands of work, for they were surely thinking all the time — as they should — of their children and their home duties. Moreover, if they doing «women's work» for which they were naturally gifted — «light manufacturing», preparing food, secretarial and clerical work, caring for the sick, waiting table, — these jobs were only housework in the public domain. Housework was unpaid, hence it had no value, and its public equivalent could not be valued comparably to «real work» and so was set at a «woman's wage».

The war changed things a good deal. Women, it was clear could do «men's work», and do it well. Moreover, men didn't want «their work» underpaid at «women's rates». They raised the old cry, coined and used mainly for self-defense, «equal pay for equal work». In the United States and in some other countries as well, wartime labor regulations extended this phrase to mean «equal pay for work of equal value». By 1951, the ILO had changed its old Equal Pay Convention to read in these new terms, and nations began to ratify it as the standard for their own countries. They were ready for it because at least more than a few women were beginning to move into what had been exclusively «men's work», and it was clear that at least some women's work was equal in value to much higher paid men's work.

While women's work is still low paid in general, indeed underpaid by any standard of comparative equity, the «equal pay for equal work» slogan has largely been realized in those rare spheres where work for men and women is the same — or substantially the same — for both genders. Indeed the world of work in most nations today has had imposed upon it the standard of equality, a standard still far from realized but nevertheless one to which women can repair in seeking admission to work or training, in presenting themselves for promotion or preferment where their qualifications are equal to or better than those of men.

The world of work now functions, at least nominally under the assumption that women are in it to stay, and that they deserve to be treated by the same standards that apply to men. We have seen, that equitable as this may sound, and however well-intentioned these policies may be, women come into the work world under very different conditions than what society imposes on men, and it is this burden which characterizes their role in the labor force as «doubly burdened».

What has not changed to any degree is the 19th century concept of the separability of family and work, and of the belief that women's innate and primary responsibility, even when engaged in work outside the home, is for the home. The structure and requirements of work are still based on the assumption that the worker — male or female — has no home responsibility or, that if she has, it must somehow be left outside the shop or office door. It is this tradition-loaded concept which is now the challenge to management, labor and government.

All three entities are aware of it. And we can find cases among all three that constitute responses, however partial, to the dilemma in which our outdated traditional principles conflict with reality. Earlier this spring, the U.S. Labor Department and the AFL-CIO called a national meeting in Washington under the heading, «Work and Family», BNA put out a volume of case reports on undertakings by all three labor market partners, as they have endeavored to respond to the dilemma and its needs. Sociologists, research centers, economists, labor relations scholars, lawyers — all are now at work on the problem. My own attempts just to build a bibliography on the subject have produced in a very short time more than 500 titles. The problems of conflict in this area are, I predict, the upcoming field of major research in labor relations.

Approaches to it are of at least two kinds: first, a recognition that women are the major victims of the new circumstances emerging from the change in work and in the family. The result is an attempt to develop suggestions and programs that will provide a support system for working

women. These proposals include, among others, maternity leave, supplemented with parental child-care leave, paid or unpaid; improved child-care programs, subsidized or unsubsidized, by national or state grants; improved health insurance programs; changes in the school year and day; cafeteria options among employer-granted fringe benefits such that they will include provisions for choices of child care and care of ill or infirm family members; revisions in family and divorce law that move away from the legal rights of the male head of household over property and children to joint responsibility and ownership by both husband and wife, along with recognition of the contribution of the wife in building her husband's career, particularly when she has done so at sacrifice of her own career preparation; lifting of age barriers on training programs in adulthood; the introduction of flextime; the recognition and protection of part-time work as eligible to benefits and fringes¹.

The second approach goes considerably deeper. It is aimed at the joint responsibility of both men and women for the maintenance and nurturance of family. It is not simply a support program for double burdened working mothers. It asks whether work itself cannot and should not be restructured. One proposal comes from the French economist, André Gorz². His argument is based on a consideration of the emerging nature of work, particularly of blue-collar work, as it becomes robotized and more and more workers are displaced. Many of the same assumptions flow from the new technology in most white-collar jobs as well. He sees that in France «the quantity of necessary labor will diminish by 30-40% within 17 years. Assuming that this quantity of work can be shared among all those who want to work, *work time could drop to less than 1 000 hours per year at the outset of the 21st century*, and that, despite the substantial growth of about 40% of the wealth produced. An average work time of 1 000 hours per year is becoming a tangible prospect».

This situation, he goes on, would allow labor and management maximum flexibility for arranging work in monthly, quarterly, or annual work patterns. In any case, the number of hours a worker works over his/her lifetime would come to about 20 000 hours, or 10 years of fulltime work, 20 years of half-time work, or — «a more likely and sensible choice» — 40 years of intermittent work. For this commitment, the worker should

1 In this connection, the report on part-time work done in Canada has set a standard both in fact-gathering and in recommendations for all persons interested in improving the lot of part-time women workers. See Commission of Inquiry on Part-time Work, *Part Time Work In Canada*, Minister of Supply, Ottawa, 1983.

2 S/He Who Doesn't Work Shall Eat all the Same: Tomorrow's Economy — and Proposals from the Left», *Dissent*, Spring, 1987, 179-187. A French version appeared last year in *Lettre Internationale*, Spring 1986.

have a guarantee of a lifetime income. This can be looked at in any one — or two — of several ways. His first proposal is for the allocation of a basic income to all citizens, a proposal under discussion in new parties now in West Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. The disadvantage inherent in such a program — that it does away with the obligation to work and breaks the linkage between working and being entitled to an income — has, as he says, a reverse consequence. «It abolishes the right to work — it releases society from the obligation to assure each citizen of the opportunity to participate in the social process of production». He goes on,

A lifetime guaranteed income is not, in this conception, a new right granted by the state; it is simply the normal remuneration, spread over one's lifetime of an amount of work done during one's life — say 20 000 hours... the guaranteed lifetime income is the logical consequence of a massive reduction of working hours without loss of real income.

Another proposal comes from the Swedish economist Gösta Rehn, who in a paper prepared for OECD in 1978³ faced the need both for reorganization of work and of rethinking the life cycle of workers in a major economic transition. Rehn would reconstruct the social security system, so as to allow everyone at regular intervals of several years throughout adulthood to have a year off from work with income comparable to unemployment insurance. The year could be used to prepare for necessary career changes; it could be used to have a child and care for it during its months of infancy; it could be devoted to rest and recreation, to literature and the arts; to body building... It would be a change from the ever deeper groove into which the routine of work life has committed men and women and made them entitled to leave.

It is the serious contemplation of some such radical change that can bring our thinking and our doing in line with the changes that have already taken place and that will go on taking place in the nature of work. If life is to have its savor — if we are not to be forced to deal with growing, massive unemployment on the one hand on the other with a working world that puts unbearable demands upon family life we must re-think and then restructure the world of work. The growing movement toward the adoption of parental leave is a tiny step in the right direction. The notion of parental leave is acceptance of the joint responsibility of both parents for the care of their small children and infirm family members. It is a foot in the door of work, otherwise tightly shut against the demands of family. Even when male parents do not at once assume their share of responsibility for child care and family illness, the idea is put in a warm spot for later incubation.

3 Gösta Rehn, *Lifelong Allocation of Time*, Paris, OECD, 1974.

The fact is, as one writer has recently pointed out, until equality is clearly defined and accepted as the norm of family as well as work life, women will continue to carry the unbearable double burden that handicaps them in the world of work and exhausts them for the family. Equal employment opportunity is thus only half the answer to women's disadvantage. The family in whatever form it takes is socially as important as work — many should say much more important. But at present these two institutions are the source of conflicting demands. Accommodation calls both for equality in the home and for the restructuring of work, so as to allow both parents to have time for family.

Famille et travail: défis au gouvernement, à la direction des entreprises et aux travailleurs

Au cours de ce siècle, les deux institutions que sont la famille et le travail ont connu de profonds changements.

En ce qui concerne le travail, notons, entre autres, une réduction des heures de travail, un déplacement de la production vers les services, l'entrée des femmes sur le marché du travail représentant maintenant 44% de la population active. Il existe cependant toujours une ségrégation des emplois et la main-d'oeuvre féminine est surtout concentrée dans un petit nombre d'occupations traditionnellement réservées aux femmes, i.e. peu rémunérées, avec peu de chances de promotions, etc.

La famille moderne, pour sa part, est caractérisée par un très faible taux de natalité, un taux de divorce élevé, plusieurs enfants vivants dans des familles séparées, etc. En majorité, maintenant, les deux conjoints gagnent un revenu et les femmes travaillent pour des raisons économiques. La vie de la femme, de la mère qui travaille, est marquée par un double fardeau car elle continue à assumer la majeure partie des tâches domestiques et l'éducation des enfants.

Malgré ces faits, des concepts dépassés demeurent fortement ancrés dans les valeurs de plusieurs. Ils concernent l'homme, «chef de la famille», «gagne-pain», etc. et la femme «reine du foyer». De plus, ce qui n'a pas changé est cette vieille croyance qu'on doit séparer travail et famille et que la première responsabilité de la femme, même si elle travaille à l'extérieur, est envers son foyer. La structure et les exigences du travail sont encore basées sur la prémisse que le travailleur, homme ou femme, n'a pas de responsabilité domestique et si l'on en a, cela doit rester en dehors du travail. Travailleurs, employeurs et gouvernement sont conscients du dilemme que posent nos valeurs traditionnelles dépassées avec la nouvelle réalité. De nombreux spécialistes de diverses formations se sont penchés sur ce problème et il devient, de plus en plus, un champ majeur de recherche en relations industrielles.

Deux approches se dégagent des travaux effectués. La première reconnaît que les femmes sont les victimes des nouvelles circonstances émergeant des changements dans le travail et dans la famille. Elle tente de développer des suggestions et politiques pour aider les femmes sur le marché du travail: congé de maternité, congé pour soins aux enfants, payé ou non, garderies, changements dans l'horaire scolaire, révision du droit de la famille, introduction d'horaires flexibles, etc. La seconde approche va beaucoup plus loin. Elle vise à rendre responsable conjointement les hommes et les femmes de l'entretien de la famille. Il ne s'agit pas seulement de trouver des programmes aidant les mères au travail à soulager leur double fardeau, mais de se demander pourquoi le travail lui-même ne pourrait pas et ne devrait pas être restructuré. Par exemple, selon l'économiste français André Gorz, il est possible d'envisager que le temps de travail pourrait n'être que de 1 000 heures/an par personne au début du 21^e siècle, compte tenu des changements technologiques et du fait que le travail doit être partagé parmi tous ceux qui veulent travailler. Ceci constituerait 20 000 heures de travail dans la vie professionnelle d'une personne devant être réparties au cours de sa carrière avec beaucoup de flexibilité. Il suggère que les travailleurs devraient jouir d'une garantie de revenus à vie. Pour sa part, Gösta Rehn, économiste suédois, croit qu'il faut repenser la réorganisation du travail et la vie de travail. Il rebâtirait le système de sécurité sociale de façon à permettre à tous d'avoir périodiquement des congés d'un an rémunérés. Ces congés pourraient servir à diverses fins: se préparer en vue d'un changement de carrière, avoir un enfant, se consacrer à ses loisirs, aux arts et à la littérature, aux sports, etc.

Ce sont de tels changements radicaux qu'il faut envisager si nous ne voulons pas être forcés de faire face à un problème de chômage massif d'un côté et de l'autre, à un monde du travail qui impose des exigences insupportables pour la vie familiale. Jusqu'à ce que l'égalité soit clairement définie et acceptée comme étant la norme, tant au travail que dans la famille, les femmes vont continuer à porter le double fardeau qui les handicape dans le monde du travail et les épuise pour leur famille. L'égalité des chances d'emploi constitue une réponse partielle au désavantage des femmes. La famille est socialement aussi importante que le travail, plusieurs diraient beaucoup plus importante. Présentement, ces deux institutions sont sources de demandes conflictuelles. Il faut trouver des compromis pour à la fois réaliser l'égalité à la maison et restructurer le travail de façon à permettre aux deux parents d'avoir du temps pour la famille.