

Long Leaves, Child Well-being, and Gender Equality

by **Barbara R. Bergmann***

Work-family programs are usually thought of as reforms of a workplace regime that gives too little allowance for the performance of home duties, particularly those traditionally done by women. The primary purpose of such programs is to allow the family to receive more services. Some versions, such as the notorious “mommy track”, frankly envision limiting women’s opportunities in the workplace so that they may continue to be available to provide substantial amounts of services in the home. Other versions of work-family programs may be less forthright, but most if not all have elements that produce important negative effects on gender equality.

Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers (GM) make the optimistic claim that, in fashioning work-family policy, “...tradeoffs among gender equality, family time and child well-being are not inevitable. The interests of men, women and children are not fundamentally at odds.” They recommend that the United States adopt the kinds of policies in force in France and the Nordic countries, and claim that these policies, suitably modified, would improve things significantly for children, women, and men, and would not cause a diminution of gender equality. Would that it were so.

The policies these countries have adopted include three main features: lengthy paid leave for parents of infants, better remunerated part-time work, and generous government subsidies for non-parental child care. The subsidies for non-parental child care would advance gender equality. However, lengthy parental leave and the encouragement of part-time work, both of which would allow parents more time at home, are destructive of it.

Most advocates of work arrangements that would allow parents more family time simply ignore the issue of gender equality, either because they don’t care about it, or because they view the full-time care of infants by their own mother as surpassingly more important, or because they fail to see the connection between work arrangements and gender equality. GM are unusual among such advocates in that they do pay attention to gender equality, and are concerned about it. They deserve great credit for that.

They well understand that a system that causes mothers to take long paid parental leaves while fathers take much shorter leaves or none at all is harmful to the cause of gender equality. They reduce the one year or more per birth offered to mothers by the European plans to six months. They increase the month or two offered on a non-transferable basis to fathers by some European plans to the same six months. This equality of treatment of mothers and fathers is the basis of GM’s optimistic view that gender equality would not suffer under their variant of the Nordic/Gallic model. That hope is, I believe, unrealistic.

In what follows, I describe the likely effects of the GM model on gender equality, and explain why I believe adoption of that model is inimical to progress both in the home and in the

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workplace and would cause retrogression. If that is indeed the case, then those of us for whom gender equality is of high importance have to consider whether we are willing to trade a retreat on that front for an increase in the time that children have with their mothers. An alternative is a high-commodification model, which would go further than we have already gone in replacing family-provided services with paid-for services, some of them provided publicly. In considering the advantages and disadvantages of high commodification, we have to examine some of the claims recently put forth that non-parental child care damages children.

Gender Equality Under the Nordic/Gallic Model

GM's proposed solution to the work-family problem for the United States would result in an increase in the amount of time job-holders could spend at home. That, of course, is precisely the purpose of the policies they propose. The increased time at home would come mainly from paid parental leave, and from an increase in part-time work. Such a policy is designed to increase the amount of child care done by family members, and most likely would increase the amount of cleaning, cooking, and laundry they would do as well. The crucial question for gender equality is, of course, how that extra amount of housework and childcare would be shared between the father and mother. (Of course, there is no father in the household in a considerable fraction of working parents' households, and this needs to be taken account of.)

The policies GM propose would incorporate features that, it is hoped, would encourage men to do more of that work. These features include a high replacement rate of salaries for those on parental leave, and an allocation of half of the family's leave time to a newborn infant's father on a use-it-or-lose-it basis. But this equality in what is offered to women and men does not necessarily translate into equality of uptake. We have to ask what men's response would be likely to be to the inducements designed to increase their participation in providing home services. The experience in the Scandinavian countries is not encouraging.

Sweden currently provides new fathers with two months of non-transferable leave, less than the six months that GM's plan allows. Forty percent of Swedish fathers take no leave at all and almost two-thirds take less than the two months. (Ericksson, 2005). Much of what they do take merely extends their summer vacation. This is really not surprising. Doing chores such as diapering, dealing with screaming children, cleaning house, and doing laundry, all in isolation from other adults, is far from the most attractive way to spend time, at least according to the taste of most people. Men have so far been exempted from these tasks, and many if not most men are likely to resist taking them on.

In most countries at most times, there is little or no pressure on men from outside the family to do more housework. Quite the contrary: men encourage other men in shirking such work, and ridicule the ones who do take it on. In the workplace, supervisors and colleagues, who would be inconvenienced by men's time off, use threats and ridicule to minimize it. The issue is not discussed in any of the media, or in schools or churches. The only pressure on a man comes from his female partner, at the risk of strain in their relationship. Of course, the last thing the mother of a new baby needs is worry that her relationship with the baby's father will be soured, with the result that she has very little leverage. Repeated requests are ignored, and labelled as nagging. GM may hope that fathers might *eventually* do fully half of the new and larger amount

of housework and child care they recommend, but there is little reason to have faith that things will evolve that way. On the contrary, the early result of their program will be to send families off in the opposite direction.

So more time at home for parents means in reality more time at home for mother, and little if any more for father. In the short run at least, there would be an increase in the amount of child care and housework done by mothers. Furthermore, the share of such work that would be done by mothers would rise. That would more firmly cement the custom of viewing child care and household tasks as “women’s work.” It might undo much of the modest progress in sharing household work that has been made in the last few decades (Bergmann, 2005; Bianchi et al., 2000), and undo the very modest advance in gender equality within the home that has been the result.

A US adoption of the GM version of the Nordic/Gallic model would have adverse effects on gender equality in the workplace as well as the home. The availability of paid parental leave would create social pressure for mothers to make use of it -- to take the leave and to stay out for the full time provided. Any woman who didn’t would be branded as a bad mother.¹ Employers would have strong incentives and more excuses to resist placing women in any but routine jobs – the kind of jobs where one person can smoothly and easily fill in for another. Discrimination against women in assignment to non-routine jobs has not yet ended. Lengthy paid parental leave, as well as more part-time work, would increase discrimination and make women’s chances of getting such jobs considerably lower.

A law requiring improvement in the pay and benefits of part-time workers, as recommended by GM, would probably increase the number of women workers (whether currently full time or out of the labor force) interested in such jobs. Workers in such jobs are seldom given opportunities for promotion or any but routine duties.

The Swedish labor force is considerably more sex-segregated than the American (Anker, 1998; Dolado, Feigueroso, and Jimeno, 2003). Women are highly concentrated in jobs performing “caring labor”. While the extent of women’s penetration into male-dominated occupations is obviously a result of many historical factors, it would not be surprising if the paid parental leave provisions have contributed to the continuing relatively high sex segregation of the Swedish occupational structure.

An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Joan Williams (2006), a proponent of work-family policies, illustrates both the gender-equality problem with such policies, and the blindness toward that problem on the part of such advocates. The article starts off by saying, “It makes no sense for universities to hire a female professor, spend thousands of dollars setting up her lab, only to have her depart because she needs a maternity leave or a part-time schedule -- and then replace her with another woman, who, in due time, may also leave for similar reasons.” What would make sense for the university, Williams argues, would be to provide such leaves and part-time schedules.

Let's face it -- if women on its science faculty actually were abandoning expensive labs for such a reason, the university's most sensible strategy would be to avoid hiring a women scientist ever again. (In fact, the publication of Williams's article in the *Chronicle* suggesting that women habitually do so may well cause a reduction in the number of young women scientists universities hire.) Williams wants us to assume that the woman who left for such a reason would be replaced by another woman. It is more likely that her department would develop an allergy to women scientists under 50.

In fact, universities don't face a serious danger of having to refurnish expensive labs for such a reason. Because science is so competitive, and priority of discovery is everything, few scientists of either sex will want to take long parental leaves, much less quit their jobs if they are denied such leaves. Such jobs are difficult to get, particularly for women, and are not given up easily.

The whole issue is in truth a big loser for women scientists. In fact, it is a big loser for any woman (or man) in competition for advancement in a professional or managerial role. Why did the *Chronicle* chose to run an article with such a patently unlikely story line? They were just joining the chorus. Intoning "paid parental leave" has become as obligatory among people who want to think of themselves as good feminists as intoning "Hail Mary" is among practicing Catholics.

Is there any length of parental leave would not constitute a detriment to gender equity? This is, of course, an empirical question, and presumably would vary by the type of job. In the absence of solid information, one might guess that one month would do minimal damage, but four months might do considerable damage. The GM suggestion of six months for each parent, taken preponderantly by mothers, could be highly destructive.

In sum, the parental leave and part-time features of the model of Work-Family policies that GM favor would most likely have the effect of significantly reducing gender equality both within the home and in the workplace. It would sacrifice the interests of adult females for a perceived (but not necessarily real) benefit to children. It would benefit male adults, who would be relieved of female competitors. Female children might benefit in the short run but would lose in the long run because of the limits to their career prospects.

This being the case, it is worth looking to see whether there are other kinds of arrangements that might bring more services to the home without the retreat from gender equality that the GM's model would entail. The next section presents some possibilities. However, each of them has important limitations or drawbacks.

Alternative Methods of Increasing the Supply of Home Services Delivered by Parents

Additional time for home services by parents might be supplied by ways that do not retreat on gender equality. Ways this could be done include:

1. a cut in the standard workday for all workers, not just parents.

2. half-time work for both parents for the same time period, paid at full-time rate, provided that one is at home in the morning, the other at home in the afternoon.
3. requirement that, to get parental leave, both parents take successive and equal periods of time off for a baby's first few years of life.
4. a reintegration of population in central cities.

A cut in the standard workday, which has not been changed in the United States since the 1930s, is advocated by GM as part of their package, and would be highly desirable.² It might even pay for itself through increased productivity. We should be watching the experience of the French in this regard.

However, only a modest amount of extra home time could be provided in this way. A cut of at most one hour per day would be likely, potentially providing 10 hours more of home time per week in two-parent families. There might be some reduction in the time children spend in non-parental care, but the extent of that shift cannot be predicted. There is some evidence that people would prefer to reduce work hours, but devote the freed-up time to "self" rather than to "family" (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). Reducing daily hours of work would not eliminate the need to put infants into non-parental care if neither parent is at home full time.

Furthermore, a reduction in standard hours, while helpful to many, would not do much for workers who are in fierce competition for partnerships in law firms, for tenured professorships in universities, for being the first to publish on some scientific subject, for promotion in a corporate managerial hierarchy. Those people frequently work 60 hours or more per week. Their work/family (or work/self) problems may be beyond help.

Methods 2 and 3 assume that two parents are available, something not true in many cases. Of the children born in 2004 in the U.S., 34 percent were born to unmarried mothers, most of whom did not have live-in partners. A further problem with methods 2 and 3 is that forcing equal sharing of leave would go against the currently held sex-role ideology of a large part of the population. The adoption of either of these methods would be very unlikely.

Having parents work different shifts, so that one parent is always available at home, is already not an uncommon arrangement. However, such a practice is frequently not conducive to a happy family life (Presser, 2003). Moreover, such an arrangement must frequently force at least one of the parents to pass up a superior job for one that fits in the appropriate time slot.

A large-scale move of population from suburbs to central cities would probably be necessary if a serious diminution of the output of gasses contributing to global warming is to occur. It would also decrease the amount of time workers spent commuting, and so increase time at home. If large city apartment houses were set up with child care centers, cafeterias, dry cleaners, supermarkets, and other services, even more time could be saved. (See Bergmann, 2005). Again, this is an unlikely development, at least in the near term.

Further Commodification as a Solution

We have reviewed the adverse effects on gender equity of lengthy parental leave allowances and part-time work, and the limited likely effect of measures that provide more family time but do not react badly on gender equity. An alternative course for providing more household services would be an increase in the purchase of services by the household or the provision or subsidization of such services by government.

The commodification of household consumption -- substituting paid-for goods and services for goods and services produced by family members -- has been advancing ever since human beings started trading with each other. After the industrial revolution, only child care and housework remained as tasks typically performed by family members. Everything else we consume is purchased, either by ourselves or by government. (Of course, the wealthy very early commodified all household functions by hiring servants or keeping slaves.) Care for children older than five or six was largely commodified by the adoption of compulsory public schools in the late nineteenth century, although in most settings school-age children were thought to need little adult care until relatively recently. In the twentieth century there was some reversal of direction: the washer and dryer operated by the wife replaced the paid laundress, and the invention of the car induced self-chauffering. Since the 1960s, the entry of mothers into the workforce in large numbers has spurred further commodification, mainly in the areas of child care and the production and cleanup of meals.

Further progress in increasing men's share of housework will be achieved slowly, if it happens at all. So gender equality will be most surely approached by driving unpaid family work down toward zero, the same direction in which it has been going for the last 6,000 years. This process would be speeded up by greater government provision or subsidization of high quality child care, advocated by GM.

The Consequences of Nonmaternal Care

If progress on gender equity requires that children spend long periods in non-maternal care, beginning at very young ages, then we have to ask what the consequences of that are for child development. We can then compare the benefits and costs -- the benefits of progress toward women's equality versus the costs, if any, to children.

In the early 1990s the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) launched a Study of Early Child Care to observe the effects of various kinds and amounts of care on children's development. This study has yielded what have to be characterized as mixed results. A report that analysed data available at the time the children were entering kindergarten (at 54 months, or four and a half years) found that time spent in non-maternal care was associated to a "modest" degree with the numbers showing aggressive behavior (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). By contrast, a report of an assessment with a different methodology that was done when the same children were nine, and had reached third grade, failed to find a connection between time in care and the number of children judged as aggressive (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004).

At 54 months, teachers and caretakers rated 9 percent of children who had averaged 0-9 hours per week in non-maternal child care as having a score indicating aggressive behavior that was more than one standard deviation above the mean. Of those children who had been in care 30-45 hours per week on average, an extra 6 out of 100 children were judged to have this type of behavior problem. In the group experiencing over 45 hours in care, a further 4 out of 100 children, (19 percent in all, as opposed to 9 percent in the lowest care group) were diagnosed as having aggressive behavior.³

It would be helpful in thinking about policy issues to have an idea of how bad the behavior of the children who show aggression one standard deviation or more above the average actually is. Are they merely argumentative, or are they a bit nasty at times, or are they monsters? Unfortunately, it is impossible to get that kind of understanding from these reports.

Remarkably, an analysis ostensibly by the same group of researchers, based on the same children's records as they stood in their ninth year, presents a different picture (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004). The researchers separated the children into groups according to their history of aggressive behavior since age two. Most children were in groups that showed consistently low levels of aggression or moderate levels that declined over time. Only 3% of children in the sample were characterized as having highly disruptive behavior that did not decline as the children got older. (p.48) At nine years of age, that group of children had lower scores on cognitive measures, lower social competence, and displayed more anti-social behavior than children in the other groups.

The differences in child care experiences by group in the 2004 report did not support the hypothesis that long hours in child care were conducive to high aggressiveness. In fact, the group with the highest and most consistent aggressiveness had experienced on average the fewest hours in non-maternal child care. And it was the groups with the lowest level of aggression who had on average spent the longest hours in care (p. 66). The authors of the monograph reporting on the third-grade outcomes explain the differences between their study and the earlier one as due to "different approaches to data analysis" and the fact that the observations on aggression were made by mothers rather than caregivers and teachers. (p. 109).

A further curiosity was an article published subsequently that went back and again rehearsed the results for the 54-month old children (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006). It included the following sentences: "[O]ur results provide support for policies that reduce the amount of time children spend in child care. These include programs that support extended welfare benefits and workplace policies that offer flexible hours and paid parental leave at any time during a child's first five years, not exclusively following the child's birth." (p. 114) It is not clear whether this is to be interpreted as suggesting that paid parental leave lasting five years be offered following each birth. We may speculate that differences in outlook among the 26 members of the committee to which authorship of all of the reports is attributed have contributed to this checkered publication history of interpretation of the results on this group of children.

Those, like the present author, who put a high value on gender equality, may remark that, even giving full credence to the finding that long hours of care may conduce to heightened

aggressiveness does not necessarily require agreeing with the establishment of long paid parental leaves. I would argue that the “modest” result, that an additional 10 children out of 100 may display aggressiveness at 54 months, an aggressiveness that may be temporary, and that some researchers have suggested is possibly a healthy reaction (Clarke-Stewart, 1989) is not worth sacrificing the move toward equality for half the human race that increased use of non-parental care would allow.

Conclusion

I have argued that the provision for paid parental leave advocated by GM would have a distinctly adverse effect on gender equality. Their advocacy of more government provision of child care would go in the opposite direction, but the net effect would probably be negative. Further commodification of household services, through family purchases and government provision is the only promising route to gender equity now in sight.

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Notes

¹ Ericksson (2005) reports that in Sweden many mothers go back to work when subsidized day care becomes available, suggesting that mothers as well as fathers prefer work to staying home with young children.

² The Fair Labor Standards Act, passed in 1938, required overtime pay if weekly hours exceeded 40. Thus an 8-hour day 5 days a week became the standard.

³ Table 8, p.997.