

Introduction

“What do you think family life will look like in fifty years?” was a question I posed to the Berkeley Family Forum, a book club of academics whose leisure time was spent doing what they were normally paid to do on the job. That evening we were dissecting Stephanie Coontz’s provocative work on the history of marriage, which concluded that married life today has become more fulfilling yet more fragile than in the past.¹ As to the future, she believed that marriage was unlikely to be revived as the primary source of commitment and caregiving in modern society. Historians are of course much better at recounting the past than forecasting what is to come. Among the historians, lawyers, and social scientists in the book club, nobody ventured to predict the normative contours of family life fifty years from now.

If the question had been asked in the same living room fifty years earlier, however, I think we would have felt more confident trying to envision where family life was headed. In the mid-1950s many of us might have predicted that the contours of family life would remain fairly stable, looking today

much as they did then—and we would have been dead wrong. Who would have guessed the remarkable changes waiting just around the corner? Soon after the 1950s, family size declined, divorce rates doubled, the labor-force participation rate of married women with children under eighteen years of age tripled, unimaginable levels of domestic violence and child abuse came to light, single parenthood soared, and cohabitation outside of marriage mounted. College life changed from sex-segregated dorms to coed housing with unisex bathrooms. In 1972 the Massachusetts Superior Court convicted William Baird of the illegal act of giving a contraceptive device to a college student during a lecture on contraception at Boston University. The decision was sustained by the State Supreme Judicial Court.² Nowadays contraceptive devices are frequently distributed to students in public high schools.

These changes in social relations and sexual mores have yielded both costs and benefits. Whether things are ultimately better or worse is open to interpretation—and depends on what they are compared to.³ In retrospect, the 1950s were an unusually stable period for the American family, often characterized as a unique interlude in an otherwise long tradition of change and anxiety about the fragility of family life.⁴ Be that as it may, the 1950s remain a common reference point against which family life is compared today, much more so than the era of the Great Depression, the Roaring Twenties, Victorian England, or the Holy Roman Empire. People who lament that family life as we once knew it is going to hell in a handbasket are thinking about the lost stability of the 1950s, but they are overlooking the lack of employment opportunities and other constraints on lifestyle options for women of that period. Today women have more control over the course and rhythm of their lives than ever before. They also struggle with more

choices about how to achieve self-fulfillment. One of the most challenging decisions concerns how much of their labor to invest in the work of motherhood and how much in paid employment. This book is about that choice.

An introduction customarily offers the lay of the land, stakes the contextual boundaries, and gives readers an idea of where the chapters are headed, why the journey was undertaken, and what it signifies. In this instance the title—*A Mother's Work: How Feminism, the Market, and Policy Shape Family Life*—pretty much tells the story. This book explores the modern-day struggle to combine employment and family life. Examining recent trends and policies, I seek to explain the social dynamics that influence this struggle and to clarify whose interests are truly being served.

Part I frames the social context by looking at how women have responded to the tensions and opportunities created by the contraceptive revolution, civil rights advances, and the changing structure of the labor market since the 1960s. Recent claims submit that after a tidal wave of increased labor-force participation, women are now “opting out” of the workforce and returning home to give birth and raise children. I appraise these claims in light of evidence that suggests that while some movement is under way, it is still too early to tell whether a sea change is in the making. Although the future remains uncertain, evidence from the past forty years illustrates a compelling long-term trend. By all accounts, there has been a significant decline in the pursuit of motherhood as usually identified by childbearing, childrearing, and household production. The rate of childlessness has climbed to historic proportions for a period of relative peace and prosperity. Those women who do have children are producing smaller families and are increasingly farming out the early years of intensive

child care to other people, as mothers shift their labor from the household to the marketplace.

What explains these changes? Some might say that women, having finally been given the chance, are now simply doing what they want—and leave it at that. Others might argue that economic necessity is driving mothers into the market. I offer a different view, which suggests that more than need and personal inclination are at work. My main line of analysis, which informs Part II, is based on three assertions: that the culture of capitalism undervalues the economic worth of child-rearing activities and domestic production, that prevailing feminist expectations overestimate the social and emotional benefits of labor-force participation, and that the family-friendly policies of the welfare state create incentives that reinforce the norms and values of capitalism and feminism. As a result, since the 1960s women's choices about how much of their lives to invest in childrearing and paid employment have been made in a social context that is heavily stacked against motherhood—regardless of women's individual needs and predilections.

There are a lot of questions to consider when delving into this topic: Does having children make economic sense? Is the sexual division of labor a rational choice? How has the time devoted to child care by employed and nonemployed mothers changed in recent decades? What are the different agendas associated with preschool child care? How are the outcomes of preschool child care measured—and who ultimately benefits from these services? To what extent is the powerful arsenal of so-called family-friendly policies in European countries truly friendly to family life?

Of course, the argument that the labor of motherhood is undervalued, and that the personal benefits of paid work are

overestimated, is not true for all women. Clearly, some women's interests are well served by the social forces emanating from the culture of capitalism, feminist expectations about work, and family-policy incentives that support an early start and continuous participation in the labor market. Indeed, these influences endorse and advance the interests of women with the aptitude and ambition to succeed in high-status, stimulating, and well-rewarded careers—those of the occupational elite. But only a small proportion of working men and women ever make it into this upper echelon of professional and corporate life. The rest tend to retire from the labor force as soon as they can. Politicians, academics, think-tank analysts, journalists, and most others who think, talk, and write about how to balance work and family life tend to labor in the groves of the occupational elite, which is one reason why much of the policy discourse in this realm emphasizes the financial, emotional, and social benefits of paid work—benefits enjoyed by this class.

The standard family-policy discourse emphasizes how best to harmonize paid work and domestic life through initiatives that facilitate a seamless transition from school to the paid labor force and encourage staying the course of paid employment with as little interruption as possible. This approach follows the model typically adhered to by men under the traditional division of labor in family life—that is, making an early start and maintaining a continuous record of employment. To achieve equality in the labor market, women have to start as quickly and remain active as long as men. Although this male model is well suited for women aiming toward the pinnacles of professional and corporate life, it may be less attuned to the needs and interests of working- and middle-class mothers in average jobs that are neither very high paying nor emotionally all that gratifying.

The conventional ledger on family policy calls for public investment in such measures as high-quality nonmaternal child care, parental leave incentives that encourage fathers to assume a greater share of child-care responsibility, and flexible working hours—all of which are designed to assist mothers in maintaining paid employment while raising young children. Efforts to reconcile work and family through policies that promote concurrent labor-force participation and childrearing are important, serve the interests of many women, and undoubtedly deserve public support. However, this model offers few, if any, benefits that endorse and advance the interests of mothers who might prefer to take a sequential approach to work and family life—investing their labor entirely in child-rearing activities during the preschool years and then moving into employment as their children become more independent and spend most of the day in school. Thus, my analysis concludes by comparing the sequential and concurrent approaches and presenting some thoughts on how to balance family-friendly policies with more choices and a greater public appreciation for a mother's work.