

## Dependent Care in the 1990s: Business and Government Share the Working Family's Burden. Part 1. Defining the Need

By Cynthia Miller

Both the American family and the American work force have undergone rapid, unprecedented change during the last several decades. Millions of employees across the country now perform their jobs while someone else cares for their children or their parents. Never before have so many women joined the work force, so many elderly people been dependent on their families, and so many children been cared for in nontraditional families and by substitute caregivers.

As a result, many people find themselves juggling workplace obligations and family responsibilities. Adding to the dilemma is the fact that corporate agendas and public policies have not kept pace with these vast changes, causing strain and stress for many employees and even forcing some to "choose between their jobs and their children or their ailing parents."<sup>1</sup>

### Changes at Home and at Work

Perhaps the most profound effect on the work/family balance is the entry of large numbers of women into the work force. In 1960, women represented 33 percent of the total work force; in 1980, 43 percent; by 2000, it is expected that women will make up at least 47 percent.<sup>2</sup> (p. 9)

By 1995, the number of preschool-age children with a working mother is expected to reach 14.4 million, with the number of school-age children with a working mother reaching 34.4 million.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most surprising, though, is the statistic that 51 percent of new mothers are either back in the workplace or looking for work by the time their children are one year old.<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for this large increase in female participation in the labor force vary among families. A General Mills American

Family Report showed that women worked, in descending order of importance, for "personal sense of accomplishment," "helping to make ends meet," and "improving the family's standard of living."<sup>5</sup> (p. 9)

Economic and social pressures have caused a major change in the structure of the American family. Howard V. Hayghe, an economist for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, points out that a "typical" family no longer exists.<sup>6</sup> His analysis of changing labor force characteristics shows that, while 53 percent of the married-couple families with children were traditional families (mother at home, father at work) and 43 percent were dual-worker families (mother and father at work) in 1975, only 33 percent were traditional and a full 63 percent were dual-worker in 1988. Similarly, the 15 percent that were single-mother families and the 1 percent that were single-father in 1975 increased to 21 percent and 3 percent, respectively, in 1988.

### The Aging Problem

Complicating the dependent-care problems of working families is "aging in America." The 30 million Americans today who are 65 years and older represent 12 percent of the population. This is almost double the 1960 figure of 17 million, according to a study by the American Association of Retired Persons. Even more surprising, the life expectancy at age 85 has increased 24 percent since 1960. Those more than 85 years of age constitute the fastest growing segment of the population.<sup>7</sup>

The aging parents of today's baby-boomers, according to Dana E. Friedman, co-president of the Families and Work Institute

and a nationally recognized specialist in corporate child care, will present an elder care crisis that will far overshadow the child care problems now experienced by society.<sup>8</sup> Some studies conducted by the Families and Work Institute indicate that 40 to 50 percent of all employees expect to care for an elderly relative sometime in the next five years.

A study by the Travelers Insurance Companies finds that more than 20 percent of all employees already provide some form of assistance, such as personal care or home management, to at least one elderly person, for an average of 6 to 10 hours a week.<sup>7</sup> The number of women in this situation of dual responsibility is expected to continue to rise because of longer life expectancies, the rising median age of the labor force, and continued increases in the labor force participation rates of women.<sup>9</sup>

Further burdened by dependent-care responsibilities are those caught in the "sandwich generation"—middle-aged adults caring for both children and elders. In the National Long-Term Care and Informal Caregivers Survey, Robyn I. Stone, National Center for Health Services Research and Health Care Technology Assessment, Rockville, Maryland, finds that more than 21 percent of those employees providing elder care also provide child care.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the average American woman now spends 17 years raising children and another 18 years caring for aged parents.<sup>11</sup> The Older Women's League in Washington, DC, states that more than a third of all women 18 and older will be lifetime caregivers.<sup>12</sup> These figures demonstrate that women are heavily burdened by caregiving responsibilities. When these responsibilities are combined with employment obligations, many caregiving persons suffer from the stress of these multiple responsibilities.

### **Balance of Career and Family**

Because they are essentially performing two jobs, employed caregivers have unique needs in the workplace. When these needs

are not met, both the employee and the employer are adversely affected. "There is a link between [job] productivity and family problems. Male and female workers with dependents generally experience more strain and work-family conflict than employees without dependents,"<sup>13</sup> Friedman reports.

In a 1988 study of 26,000 employees working for 30 companies, John P. Fernandez, president of Advanced Research Management Consultants, Inc., based in Philadelphia, found that a large proportion of employed parents experienced stress-related health problems as a result of balancing work and family.<sup>2</sup> (p. 64) The problems included difficulty getting up (73 percent), feeling nervous or fidgety and tense (75 percent), pains in the back or spine (61 percent), overeating (53 percent), more headaches than normal (53 percent), trouble getting to sleep (56 percent), becoming tired in a short time (56 percent), heart pounding or racing (38 percent), smoking to excess (19 percent), trouble breathing (26 percent), poor appetite (28 percent), drinking alcohol excessively (23 percent), and spells of dizziness (21 percent). One of every five employees with children 18 and under said that their job performances were affected "to a great extent" or "to some extent" by child care problems.<sup>2</sup> (p. 40) Consequently, employed parents missed work, left early, and came in late more often than childless employees. And, the younger the child, the more frequent the scheduling problems. Clearly, the roles of employee and parent conflict.

Likewise, caring for an elderly parent while maintaining a career causes a variety of problems. In a survey for TransAmerica Life Companies, 80 percent of caregivers of elders reported emotional strain, 61 percent reported physical strain, and 55 percent reported financial strain.<sup>7</sup> Elaine M. Brody of the Philadelphia Geriatric Center finds that working women with parent-care responsibilities miss work (58 percent), are interrupted at work (47 percent), lose pay (18 percent), and regret their choice to work (17 percent).<sup>14</sup>

A study of work accommodations by Stone and Pamela Farley Short for the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, Rockville, finds that employees, especially women, primarily responsible for the care of elderly persons often take unpaid leave, reduce work hours, or rearrange work schedules in an effort to balance responsibilities. In fact, elder-care demands keep some caregivers from working at all.<sup>15</sup>

### **Business and Government Can Help**

American families in the work force need help with their dependent-care problems. The question remains, though, where does the burden fall? Is it a private problem or a public responsibility? Are business and government obligated to help families address their dependent-care problems? Will the solution be found in the political arena, the corporate corridors, or in the home? The solution, as Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn put it in their book *The Responsive Workplace: Employers and a Changing Labor Force*, may rest in "a public and private mix."<sup>16</sup>

In fact, all sectors of society bear part of the responsibility because the clash of dependent-care responsibilities and workplace obligations negatively impacts on the productivity of employees, the profitability of many companies, and the position of the country in world markets. Indeed, if families, business, and government each stand to benefit, why shouldn't each contribute to the development of an effective policy?

According to the National Research Council, "recruitment, retention, and productivity increasingly depend on the availability of support and services to assist employees in managing their family responsibilities."<sup>17</sup> (p. 9) Fernandez finds that for every one dollar spent to help employees with child care, companies get a three-dollar return from increased productivity and reduced health-care costs.<sup>5</sup> Ellen Greenberger, head of the Program in Social

Ecology at the University of California, Irvine, finds that "family-responsive policies at work appear likely to pay off especially well in women's more positive attitudes toward their job and employer."<sup>18</sup> An article in *Working Mother* magazine claims that employers who help their employees find acceptable child care "benefit directly from less absenteeism, tardiness and turnover—plus high morale."<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, corporations that ignore the problems of employees who are caregivers often "reap a negative harvest of parental stress, anxiety, and absenteeism." Rep. Pat Schroeder (Democrat, Colorado) warns that business will regret not doing more to help parents because "if families do not get off to the right start, business will pay later in the form of drug abuse [and] crime."<sup>20</sup>

Although nearly 1,000 corporations now offer near- or on-site child care, it is not the answer for all employers. In fact, Friedman notes that "a child care response does not require the construction of an on-site day care center."<sup>21</sup> Instead, she suggests that employers provide employees with flexibility and control over their jobs. Such benefits include family leave, flextime, telecommuting, job-sharing, and part-time work.

Suzanne Donovan and Harold Watts of the Public Policy Center at Columbia University report that "government support of quality care programs for disadvantaged children may indeed be an investment that yields positive returns in the long run."<sup>22</sup> Further, monetary savings may even occur due to "a larger tax base, fewer welfare and unemployment payments, lower costs for special education, and possibly reduced criminal justice system costs."<sup>22</sup> Finally, Janice Gibeau, who consults for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, says "the care givers of today, primarily women, are making themselves care recipients in the future by leaving the work force or taking a less responsible job in order to care for an elderly family member." She adds, "they're losing valuable pensions and insurance benefits, and society will be left to pick up the cost when these women become elderly."<sup>17</sup>

## Caring Begins at Home

There are three basic attitudes that affect the way families and society think about this issue: (1) uncertainty about whether women should be in the workplace; (2) confusion about the male contribution to caregiving at home; and (3) pretense that the family can handle its own care-giving problems.

T. Berry Brazelton, a professor at Harvard Medical School and chief of the Child Development Unit at Boston Children's Hospital, in his book *Working and Caring*, says, "the unstated and largely unconscious belief that women should stay home dominates U.S. policy-making today."<sup>23</sup> Eradicating this attitude is the first step toward changing society's view of responsibility at home and at work.

## The Role of Men

Arlie Hochschild, a Distinguished Teacher at the University of California, Berkeley, writes in her book, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, of the "stalled revolution," where, despite women's massive entry into the work force, "most men have yet to really adapt to the changes in women."<sup>24</sup>

Hopeful news indicates that, although women are primarily responsible for meeting the family's needs, men with working wives are beginning to bear more family responsibility. And, Fernandez says, significantly more men reported having child care problems in 1988 than in 1984, and "more and more employees—especially men—are finding it difficult to balance work and family responsibilities."<sup>25</sup> (p. 24-5) Finally, it has been shown that the work of fathers is as adversely affected by child care dilemmas as is that of mothers.<sup>25</sup>

Even the most functional families, where men and women share the burden at home and at work, need help. The "myth of the self-sufficient family" implies that government "must not interfere with the private arrangements within a family, except for

three areas that have been historically adopted: compulsory education, state control of marriage and divorce procedures, and state supervision of families on public assistance."<sup>26</sup>

In other words, government is not responsible for dependent-care problems and families are expected to handle work/family conflicts on their own. This illusion makes families feel that they have failed if they request outside help.

In reality, these working families are no less caring than those who do not need help. They long to balance the most valuable aspects of their lives. As author Renée Y. Magid says, most of today's working parents are "individuals who desperately want to rear their children effectively and experience the joys of parenting, and who also need to pursue paid employment."<sup>27</sup> Barbara Lepis, director of Partnership for Eldercare in New York, agrees when she says that employees "don't want a way out of their caregiving responsibilities—they just want some help in coping."<sup>28</sup>

Public support need not usurp the family's power to make the intensely personal choices associated with caring for their families. On the other hand, corporate programs and public policies should "affirm the role of families" and "support rather than detract from" the family's role.<sup>17</sup>

In short, society can no longer pretend that work/family conflicts do not exist or that families can handle the competing demands of working and caring on their own. After all, the well-being of all American families and the future productivity of the work force are at stake.

In the next essay, we examine the roles that business and government play in helping to solve many dependent-care problems. We ask: What are business and government currently doing? Which are some of the innovative companies? What are some of the creative policies? What are other countries doing? How does the US compare? And, finally, must Americans continue to choose between family and career?

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## Editorial Schedule Change

With the first issue of 1991, ISI® implemented a schedule change in the front matter for *Current Contents*®, *Citation Classics*® and the *ISI® Press Digest*, including *Hot Topics*, now appear every other week. They alternate with either an essay by Eugene Garfield, a reprint with an appropriate introduction, or an essay by an invited guest.