

## WMC FEATURES

### Why Work-Family Policies Are a Women's Issue—and More

By *Ellen Bravo* | August 1, 2013

When Congressional women leaders introduced an Economic Agenda for Women and Families last week, they included paid leave—paid sick days and paid family leave—with fair pay and child care as bedrock components of what women need to achieve economic security. They chose to launch this agenda on the 165th anniversary of the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca Falls, where 300 women and men gathered in 1848 to launch a movement for women's equality.

For many of us active in the movement for fair work-family policies, this has been a welcome development after years of people urging us not to call this a women's issue. Their arguments look like this:

Calling work-family policies a women's issue will marginalize the problems and solutions. Elected officials and opinion makers will not take it seriously. These are economic issues that affect everybody, we're told. That's the way to get attention.

Calling work-family policies a women's issue will narrow the work. It leaves out men and all the other groups impacted—children, seniors, people with a chronic illness or disability, workers, parents, business owners, LGBT couples, survivors of violence.

Yet placing these issues squarely in a women's economic agenda is an inspiring and hopeful development. And it's also smart politics.

The lack of family-friendly policies in the United States is rooted in the undervaluation of women and women's work. Too many workplaces still operate as if the workforce is comprised of men with a wife at home full-time to raise the kids—in spite of the fact that **the majority of families with children have every parent in the workforce**. Caregiving is seen as work done by women for free in the home—with no need for fair compensation when others are hired to do it for pay, and no need to have workplace policies that allow time for it.

The dual responsibilities of work and family affect almost every aspect of women's equality. **Women's real and assumed caregiving roles contribute to and are used as an excuse for lower pay**. Denying women time for caregiving impedes women's mobility and advancement and shores up the glass ceiling, while dragging women into poverty and making it harder for them to get out.

And lack of policies like paid sick days and paid family leave keep women locked into narrow gender roles. As Gloria Steinem noted, "Women are not going to be equal outside the home until men are equal in it"—and that won't happen in large numbers as long as men are punished at work for being involved fathers, sons, and husbands.

But work and family policies are also more than a women's issue. Here's how House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Rep. Rosa DeLauro **summed up the goals of their agenda**: "Our pro-family agenda will help strengthen the middle class, grow our economy, and provide a brighter future for the next generation."

Being able to stay employed and have money to cover the basics is central to economic recovery and building strong families. To boost the economy, **we need to stop job loss** and add jobs—policies like paid sick days and affordable family leave help reach that goal.

When working families lose income while caring for a new or sick loved one, it means people can't pay their bills or afford to spend on anything from new tires to new shoes without falling into debt. Small business owners cite **lack of sales as the greatest obstacle to recovery**. As employers like Freddy Castiblanco, owner of Terraza 7 Live Music in Elmhurst, New York, put it, "I need people in my community not to lose a job or paycheck when they're sick so they can come to my club."

Work and family issues do affect a broad and diverse spectrum of people. Groups playing a key role in advancing fair work-family policies include Easter Seals and the Council on Developmental Disabilities in Georgia, small business owners in Seattle and around the country, Kids Count and AARP in Rhode Island, Fight Asthma Milwaukee and Voces de la Frontera in Milwaukee, Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, union locals, and male and female workers everywhere. It's not surprising that many racial justice groups are involved, given that **workers in communities of color are more likely than whites to be denied access to work-family protections**.

But the question facing us isn't whether or not to call work-family policies a women's issue. The real question is: How do we move more of our elected leaders to get behind these policies?

As our movement reaches out, we need to remember that elected representatives are also touched by asthma, autism, and Alzheimer's. Even men used to having wives do the caregiving often have daughters or daughters-in-law impacted by inflexible workplace policies. More and more, lawmakers and candidates are either women grappling with these issues themselves or men who want to be deeply involved in their kids' lives.

Polls show widespread support for these policies across party lines, as well as the ever-increasing power of women voters. Candidates who recognize the importance of women's votes will understand that these issues are a key way to reach women and to energize them to go to the ballot box.

We need to show candidates that paid sick days and paid family leave are good for women, for men, for families, for business, and for the economy—and also for politicians' own jobs.

And we need to build the power to make that stick.

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