

# Study explores how nations' policies affect mothers' ability to balance work-family life

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When it comes to supporting working mothers, the United States' work-family welfare policies leave much to be desired, according to a

comparative study of working mothers in multiple countries by the University of Texas (UT) at Austin.

"Work-family policies reflect and reinforce ideologies about gender: what men and women 'should' and 'shouldn't' do," said study author Caitlyn Collins, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at UT Austin. "Through policies, countries say something about their citizens and shape the opportunities available to them."

In her research, Collins interviewed 135 middle-income working [mothers](#) in the U.S., Germany, Italy, and Sweden to understand their experiences balancing motherhood and employment given each country's social policies and cultural attitudes. Each country represented one of the four recognized work-family welfare models Western countries implemented as more women began entering the workforce: liberal (U.S.), conservative (Germany), Mediterranean (Italy), and social-democratic (Sweden). Liberal states privatize the provision of social support, conservative states split welfare responsibilities between public and private sectors, Mediterranean states' [social welfare](#) systems are highly fragmented, and social-democratic states take full responsibility for citizen welfare.

Collins found that outside of Sweden, where most working mothers felt supported as both mothers and employees, the majority of working mothers experienced uncertainty and tension between being a mother and a paid worker. Swedish working mothers felt supported by gender equality and labor market policies that grant the same rights and obligations to both men and women.

"Our understanding of whose job it is to raise and support a family really depends on the cultural and political context," said Collins, who will present her research at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA). "Paid work is valued in contemporary

societies, and the unpaid work of maintaining a home is often culturally invisible and undervalued."

In their interviews, most U.S. working mothers felt supported as workers, but not as mothers. With no federally mandated paid maternity leave and only need-based entitlements available, America treats childrearing as a private responsibility.

German working mothers felt supported as mothers or caregivers, but not as workers. Mothers with young children who returned to the workforce were often criticized as "raven mothers"—women who fled the nest and deserted their offspring to pursue a career, Collins said.

Italian working mothers did not feel supported as workers or as mothers and expressed the need for more reliable resources to protect and aid [working mothers](#). Many struggled with job security and childcare resources, forcing them to depend on family members to assist in childcare.

"The conversation is no longer about whether women should work, because today it is often economically necessary for families to have two incomes to stay afloat," Collins said. "The conversation today is about the conditions in which families are best able to manage earning an income while caring for their members that does not place this burden unduly on women's shoulders."

**More information:** The paper, "Work-Family Policies and Working Mothers: A Comparative Study of Germany, Sweden, Italy, and the United States," will be presented on Sunday, Aug. 23, at 2:30 p.m. CDT in Chicago at the American Sociological Association's 110th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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