How America's family-hostile policies are hurting women and children

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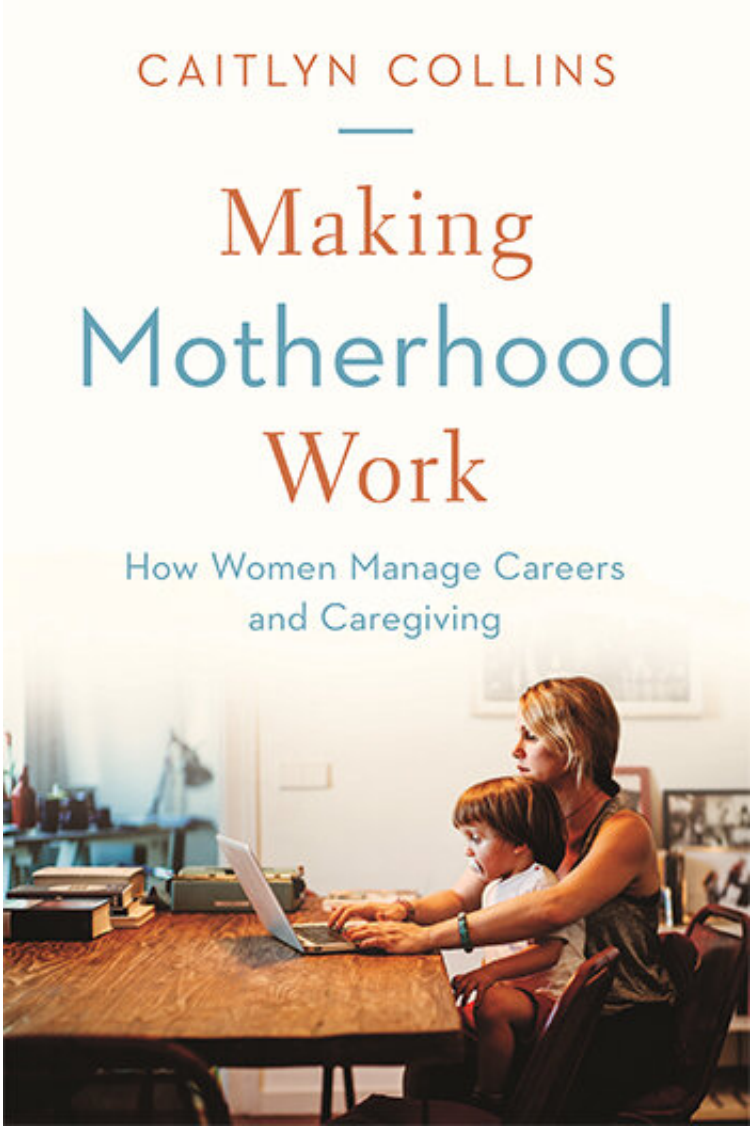

Stress and exhaustion dominate the lives of working mothers in the United States. And no wonder: Of all western industrialized countries, the U.S. ranks dead last for policies that support working mothers and their families.

Unlike those in most European countries—and practically every other industrialized nation—American mothers have no access to federal paid parental leave and no minimum standard for vacation and sick days.

Many American moms still struggle to raise families in a country with one of the highest gender wage gap and the highest maternal and child poverty rates.

Despite these disparities, work-family conflict is not an inevitable feature of contemporary life, argues Caitlyn Collins, assistant professor of sociology in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis, and the author of a new book that details how the United States' exceptionally family-hostile public policies are hurting women and children.

In *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving*, released Feb. 12 by Princeton University Press, Collins takes us into the kitchens, living rooms, parks, cafés, office cubicles and conference rooms where working mothers' daily lives play out in Sweden, Germany, Italy and the United States. She explores how 135 middle-class women navigate employment and motherhood given the different work-family policies available in each country.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with women in each country conducted over five years, Collins articulates just how crucial government policies and cultural support are to ensuring "work-family justice," which she describes as an assurance that "every member of society has the opportunity and power to fully participate in both paid work and family

care."

Described by Publisher's Weekly as "intelligent, thought-provoking, and clarifying," "Making Motherhood Work" offers a clear, research-based argument that the U.S. is failing its mothers and families. America's mothers don't need more highly individualistic tips on achieving work-family balance. They need justice.

Blueprints for achieving these changes emerges readily from her intimate examination of the daily lives of working mothers across the four countries. Through side-by-side comparisons, she demonstrates that improving the lives of mothers and their families in the U.S. requires changes both in public policies and cultural attitudes.

In Sweden — renowned for its gender-equal policies — mothers assume they will receive support from their partners, employers and the government. In the former East Germany, with its history of mandated employment, mothers don't feel conflicted about working, but some curtail their work hours and ambitions.

Mothers in western Germany and Italy, where maternalist values are strong, are stigmatized for pursuing careers. Meanwhile, American working mothers stand apart for their guilt and worry.

And Collins reminds readers: these women are middle-class. They're the proverbial canaries in a coal mine for mothers' work-family conflict. Low-income women, too often racial/ethnic minorities, have far fewer resources to draw on and less support to reduce their stress than those Collins interviewed. So if middle-class mothers are engulfed in stress, less advantaged mothers' difficulties are likely far more acute.

Policies alone, Collins discovers, cannot solve women's struggles. Easing them will require a deeper understanding of cultural beliefs about gender

equality, employment and motherhood. With women held to unrealistic standards in all four countries, the best solutions demand that we redefine motherhood, work and family.

As Harvard Business Review senior editor Alison Beard points out in a recent review of Making Motherhood Work, Collins' writing captures exceptionally poignant moments by transporting readers into the homes, neighborhoods and workplaces of the women she interviewed.

- For example, Collins writes of Samantha, a Washington, D.C., lawyer, who before she had children was told that she could do anything, that she could be at the top of her field. That's a "load of crap," she said later. "I can't do everything. If I keep all the balls in the air, I'm broken."
- And Donetta, a professor in Rome, recalls how her supervisor warned her not to get pregnant or her career would be over. So "at work," she explains, "you don't even mention your family. … You are pretending you don't have anything to do at home."
- From women in the western German cities of Munich, Stuttgart and Heilbronn, Collins hears the terms "career whore" and Rabenmutter, or "raven mother," which refers to a selfish woman who abandons her young in the nest to fly off and pursue a career.

Collins demonstrates that policies alone do not fully account for or solve women's problems. Work-family policies, she argues, are symptomatic of larger cultural understandings of what is and isn't appropriate for mothers, and as such they play a role in reproducing the existing social order.

She shows that what mothers want and expect regarding work and family depend on their social context, as do the solutions they employ to alleviate their stress. She highlights how the larger cultural

context—including beliefs about gender equality, employment and motherhood—is crucial for understanding and ameliorating mothers' difficulties.

"Women's perspectives should be central to any endeavors in the U.S. to craft, advocate for, and implement work-family policy as a force for social change," Collins said. "By gaining firsthand knowledge of how working mothers combine paid work with child-rearing in countries with diverse policy supports, I expose both the promise and the limits of work-family policy for reducing mothers' work-family conflict and achieving gender equality."

Adds Collins: "Working mothers' struggles to reconcile employment and motherhood, as well as the policy solutions to resolve this conflict—are of urgent public concern. Our government depends on mothers. So why are we failing to support them?"

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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