Women's Work

Key Policies and Paradigms for an Inclusive Post-Pandemic Economy

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an economic crisis that has been disastrous for women. As of June 2021, there were still **3.4 million women** who had lost jobs since February 2020 and had not found new employment, including **1.8 million** women in the U.S. who are missing from the workforce entirely. Despite recent overall labor growth, women's labor force participation rates remain at their lowest level since 1988.

Pandemic-induced unemployment has been disproportionately concentrated in sectors dominated by women, such as the service and public sectors, and women in these industries are benefiting the least from the job growth that has resulted from the economy reopening. The implications for a generation of women are devastating, including higher rates of **food** and **housing instability** and **lifetime earnings losses**. But a recession that has driven millions of women out of the paid labor force also creates vulnerabilities in our entire economic system, making any economic recovery slower and less equitable, and thus the resulting economy less robust. Women's employment is essential for the **41 percent** of families in which women serve as the sole or primary breadwinner and is a key driver of **middle-class family income gains** and economic growth, more broadly. Consequently, addressing the current women's labor force participation crisis must be central to economic recovery and to efforts to build a less fragile, more inclusive economy.

As devastating as the pandemic has been for women's paid employment, the conditions for the current crisis were set long before COVID-19 hit U.S. shores. Women's pre-pandemic declining rates of labor force participation (a trend unique to the U.S. among wealthy, industrialized nations), pervasive and enduring gender and racial pay and wealth gaps, the inequitable distribution of unpaid domestic and caregiving labor, and lack of basic economic supports such as family allowances, child care, and paid leave created a "perfect storm," especially for Black and Latinx women and mothers of young children. In short, the COVID-19 economic crisis, which has been popularly termed a "she-cession," compounded longstanding race and gender inequities. Unless the root structural issues are addressed, the exacerbated economic disadvantage Black, Latinx, and other women of color are suffering could create a level of hardship from which they may never fully recover.

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> ***Unless the root structural issues are addressed, the exacerbated economic disadvantage Black, Latinx, and other women of color are suffering could create a level of hardship from which they may never fully recover.***

Fortunately, there is hope on the horizon. The stimulus checks and additional benefits provided by the American Rescue Plan **significantly decreased material hardship** in the early months of 2021, improving families' ability to purchase food and pay bills and decreasing anxiety and depression. And now, the U.S. stands poised to make a historic investment in the kind of care infrastructure that would help support those who have suffered most during the pandemic re-enter the labor force and manage their work and family responsibilities.

New analysis by TIME'S UP finds the caregiving investments proposed in President Biden's American Jobs Plan and American Families Plan would dramatically increase women's economic outlook and improve the economic health of the country. The proposals would create at least 1.6 million new jobs for women and enable at least 3 million women currently constrained by caregiving responsibilities to join the labor force in the first year alone. The addition of 3 million women would increase women's labor force participation by approximately 2.2 percentage points. This increase would erase a generation of pre-COVID-19 labor market declines. Coupled with the ongoing labor market recovery from COVID-19, these transformative investments are poised to take women's labor force participation in the U.S. close to an all-time high.*

Public investments in care infrastructure alone will not alleviate the women's employment crisis, nor eradicate the gender and racial exclusion that has been a consistent feature of the American economy since our nation's founding. **Correcting for centuries of systematic exclusion requires rethinking more fundamental relationships to power, capital, and wealth,** as well as strategies for distributing caregiving responsibilities more equitably and decreasing the degree to which performing care is accompanied by financial risk. Although numerous policy changes are necessary (e.g., higher minimum wage, increased labor protections, universal health care, public investments in workforce development, changes to tax policy), this brief focuses on the care economy[1] for two reasons:

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* Methodological note: This analysis, calculated by Katherine Gallagher Robbins, is a conservative estimate of the impacts of the Biden-Harris administration's proposals. First, the analysis estimates how many of the 2.1 million jobs created by these policies (see **Palladino and Lala**) will be filled by women based on their current share of care occupations and the overall workforce. The analysis then estimates the increase in the number of mothers with young children under six who will join the labor market, using data from the Current Population Survey and existing estimates in the literature regarding the impact of child care and preschool on mothers' labor force participation (see **Chaudry and Hamm**, **Malik**). The analysis uses data from the **AARP Caregiving in the U.S. 2020** report to estimate approximately how many women have left the labor market due to caregiving responsibilities for people with disabilities and older adults, and how much less likely women are to leave when supportive policies are in place. Due to a lack of available data, this analysis does not include how many of the women who may receive home- and community-based services under the Biden plan (estimated to be more than 3.2 million women) will be able to join the labor market due to these supports, though **evidence** indicates these services provide critical work supports for many.

- Public investments in caregiving are foundational and potentially significant in their collective impact, and **studies** have estimated that about a third of the difference between pre-pandemic rates of women's labor force participation in the U.S. and other comparable wealthy, industrialized nations can be attributed to the U.S.'s lack of caregiving supports such as child care and paid leave.

- The current discourse over care policies highlights the degree to which efforts to build a less fragile, more inclusive economy are cultural in nature and rooted in beliefs about gender, race, class, and family.

Even at a moment when economic suffering is so acute and widespread, it is far from certain that we will see the scale of public investments that the moment demands. In recent weeks, we have seen a resurgence of 1970s-style cultural attacks, with some critics trying to characterize public investments in child care, in particular, as "class war," as likely Republican Ohio Senate candidate J.D. Vance **tweeted**, "against normal people." At the heart of this opposition is a belief in the superiority of a 1950s-style "traditional" two-parent nuclear family and deep resistance to public investments that support and enable women's paid work. Such views may feel like a throwback to another era, but they remain politically powerful and a real threat to the kinds of policy responses the moment demands.

In this brief, we contend that:

- Women's labor force participation plays an essential role in women's economic well-being, a robust economic recovery, economic growth, and a stronger economic system in general;
- Care infrastructure plays a critical role in supporting and enabling women's labor force participation and is, consequently, a foundational policy priority; and
- The long-dominant economic philosophy that, for decades, blocked investment in care infrastructure is showing signs of cracking. And yet, a pernicious set of "traditional" cultural norms about gender, race, class, and family remain strongly intact. Combating them is essential for advancing women's economic progress, economic growth, and racial and gender equity.

The COVID-19 crisis coincided with a **re-examination** of economic tenets that have held sway for decades, opening the door to new policy possibilities. Now we must do the same with the family norms that have stymied women's economic progress, devalued women's paid and unpaid work, constricted economic growth, and perpetuated racial and gender inequity. **At this precarious moment, it is important to recognize that this economic crisis is also a family crisis, meaning that it is entrenched in a nostalgic and exclusionary view of family life and prevents us from truly tackling the problems of our economy.**

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[1] We define the "care economy" broadly as an economy that undergirds a comprehensive system of caregiving (including child care and early childhood education, and home and community-based care for the elderly, ill, and disabled), access to fair wages and paid leave for all, and labor protections for the caregiving workforce. For more details, see the **CareCantWait policy agenda**.

Introduction: The Current State of Women's Economic Well-Being

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an economic crisis that has been disastrous for women. Women's rates of paid employment have plummeted. As of June 2021, there were still **3.4 million women** who had lost jobs since February 2020 and had not found new employment, including **1.8 million women** in the U.S. who are missing from the workforce entirely. Despite recent overall labor growth, women's labor force participation rates remain at their lowest level since 1988.

The pandemic has magnified inequity in ways that have particularly harmed women of color. Black and Latinx women have **disproportionately suffered job losses**, which have been concentrated in the hard-hit service, hospitality, and retail sectors. As of June 2021, unemployment rates among Black, Latinx, and Asian American women were at **8.5, 7.9, and 5.3 percent**, respectively — 1 to 1.6 times those of white men. Mothers of young children have been pushed out of the paid labor force as a result of school and child care closures. During the pandemic, women were **three times** more likely than men to be not working as a result of child care challenges.

The potential short- and long-term consequences of this crisis, which has been popularly termed a "she-cession," are dire. During the pandemic, women were more likely than men not to **have enough to eat**, and Black, Latinx, and Asian American women were more likely to be **behind** on rent or mortgage payments, putting them at higher risk for housing instability. Thirteen percent of women of color have **lost health care coverage** since the pandemic began, a rate that was nearly twice as high as the 7 percent of white men, white women, and men of color who each similarly lost coverage. Even women who are returning or will eventually return to the workforce are vulnerable to career setbacks, lower pay, and decreased Social Security or retirement income. A 2018 **report** by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that an employment gap of a year leads to a 39 percent decrease in women's annual earnings — a figure that rises to 65 percent for a gap of four years or more. Recent **analyses** from the Center for American Progress estimated that a typical American woman earning a median wage before the pandemic could lose $250,000 in lifetime earnings if she returns to work in 2022 and $600,000 if she does not return to work until 2024.

> ***Women's labor force participation rates remain at their lowest level since 1988.***

The Critical Role of Women's Employment to Economic Recovery and Women's Economic Well-Being

In less than a year, the U.S. erased more than 30 years of women's employment gains. And yet, the conditions for the current crisis were set long before the pandemic hit U.S. shores. Economic opportunity and security have long been segregated along race and gender lines. In 2018, women were 36 times more likely to live in poverty than men, with Black, Latinx, and Indigenous women experiencing poverty rates that were two to three times as high as those among non-Hispanic white men. Even before the pandemic, U.S. women's labor force participation rates had been on a slow decline since 2000[2] — a trend that distinguishes the U.S. from most other wealthy, industrialized nations. In 1990, the U.S. ranked sixth in rates of women's paid employment of the 22 wealthiest countries. By 2010, the U.S. had fallen to 17th.

U.S. women's declining rates of labor force participation were already having a negative macroeconomic impact before the pandemic. S&P Global estimated that if U.S. women's rates of workforce participation had kept pace with those of Norway, the standard-bearer, the U.S. economy would have been \$1.6 trillion larger by 2017 than it was — an amount that equates to an extra \$5,000 for every adult and child in the U.S. An International Monetary Fund (IMF) report calculated that if women's employment rates matched men's, U.S. GDP would grow by 5 percent (or approximately \$1 trillion based on 2020 U.S. GDP). And a 2015 McKinsey report estimated that reducing gender inequity by increasing women's economic and political opportunities and expanding women's legal protections would increase global GDP by \$12–28 trillion by 2025, depending on how aggressively nations moved toward gender equity.

After the pandemic, the situation will be even more dire. Quite simply, the speed and strength of any economic recovery are tied to how well the U.S. addresses the employment crisis among women. In March 2021, Federal Reserve Board Governor Lael Brainard warned of potential "scarring effects" for household incomes and growth unless the declines in women's labor force participation are reversed soon. Brainard's concern is well justified: from 1979 to 2016, women's paid work drove 91 percent of income gains experienced by middle-class families. A recession that has driven millions of women out of the paid labor force creates vulnerabilities in our entire economic system, making any economic recovery slower and less equitable, and thus the resulting economy less robust.

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[2] The exceptions to this trend were Latinx women, whose rates of workforce participation rose from 59.4 percent in February 2000 to 62.2 percent in February 2020. In contrast, workforce participation among Black and white women both declined between 2000 and 2020 (by three and two points, respectively).

Women's Employment: A Necessary but Insufficient Component of Inclusive Growth

Since the crisis began, economists have emphasized the need for an inclusive recovery. Doing so necessitates particular attention to the factors that will help women return to paid work after losing their jobs or being pushed out of the labor force. But employment alone will not address the underlying inequities that have made the U.S. economy so fragile and could threaten a robust, shared recovery.

Even when women are employed, gender pay and wealth gaps disadvantage women across the board. When those changes are coupled with the racial pay and wealth gaps, women of color are particularly harmed. Although women's median earnings **rose slightly** over the last two decades (in contrast to men's, which declined over the same period), women still experienced significant pay disparities from men. Over the last 20 years, the gender wage gap narrowed only by seven cents. Women are paid **82 cents** for every dollar paid to a man. For some women of color, the gap is even larger. Latinx women are paid 55 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic male counterparts; Native American women, 60 cents; Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women and Black women are paid 63 cents; and Asian women, 87 cents. Although such figures reveal the interplay between race and gender, they still obscure significant differences within groups, including large disparities in pay among subgroups of AAPI women.

Women are paid less than men in **every industry**, but what further disadvantages women economically is the fact that women — and especially BIPOC women — are concentrated in low-paid professions, including many with few or poor benefits and difficult or dangerous working conditions. The economic value assigned to jobs is neither innate nor impartial. Longitudinal examinations of industry pay trends demonstrate that as greater numbers of women move into professions, their **pay declines**. Many professions that went from being majority male to female in the last half of the 20th century saw commensurate reductions in median hourly pay. In contrast, professions that went from being majority women to majority men experienced an **increase in pay and prestige**. Today, **more than half** of the gender wage gap can be accounted for by the different industries and occupations in which women and men work.

The COVID-19 recession could further exacerbate pay inequality by gender and race. Although the overall gender pay gap narrowed slightly from 2019 to 2020 (from 81 to 82 cents per dollar paid to men), this "gain" was due to the disproportionate **loss of jobs in the low-paid service sector** — jobs that are much more likely to be held by Black and Latinx women. After the pandemic, some economists predict that the gender pay gap will **widen by five percentage points**, a regression with serious potential repercussions, especially for the most socioeconomically vulnerable women.

Caregiving Policies and Women's Work

The policy barriers to women's labor force participation in the U.S. are well-known. Unlike the vast majority of wealthy, industrialized nations, the U.S. lacks a public system of comprehensive early care and education, requiring families to privately purchase care for young children — at prices that have increased at rates **double to inflation** since the 1990s. And unlike nearly all other countries in the world, the U.S. does not provide paid leave to parents and other caregivers, guarantee health care, or, until the recent passage of the American Rescue Plan, provide significant tax credits or family allowances to help defray the costs of raising children.

The disparity between family benefits in the U.S. and much of the rest of the world is stark. From 1990 to 2010, the U.S. increased its number of government-mandated parental leave weeks from zero to 12 unpaid weeks. In contrast, the average increase in parental leave benefits among non-U.S. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries during the same 20-year period went from 37 to 57 paid weeks. **Studies** have estimated that about a third of the pre-pandemic difference between the rate of women's labor force participation in the U.S. and other OECD nations during those decades can be attributed to these discrepancies between the U.S.'s and its wealthy, industrialized counterparts' investments in policies that support caregiving.

The U.S.'s historic refusal to invest in child care, paid leave, and other family benefits is particularly striking, given the programs' well-documented economic benefits. Beginning in the **1960s** and **1970s**, researchers began longitudinal experimental studies examining the effects of high-quality early care and education. Over the course of the following decades, they amassed evidence of the programs' long-term beneficial effects on children and their economic return on investment. In the early 2000s, the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Board **found** such programs to be a "good buy," with an internal rate of return of 16 percent and a 12 percent internal rate of return for society in general — a much higher rate than that of many so-called traditional economic development investments. In May 2021, a randomized experiment of Boston's public preschool program found **extensive benefits** for children's educational and behavioral outcomes, including higher rates of high school graduation and college attendance and lower rates of juvenile incarceration.

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Additional recent analyses have documented the economic benefits of child care for job creation and women's earnings and economic growth. The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) estimated that capping child care expenditures at 10 percent of family income[3] could increase overall women's labor force participation to rates that would generate roughly $210 billion in additional GDP. A recent report by the National Women's Law Center and Columbia University found that a universal child care system would help 1.3 million more women enter the workforce and earn a collective $130 billion across their lifetimes. A report by TIME'S UP calculated that a $77.5 billion per year investment in care sectors would support the creation of 22.5 million new jobs and spur $2.2 trillion in new economic activity over a 10-year period. And the Center for American Progress estimated that the Child Care for Working Families Act, which proposes expanding child care assistance to low-income and middle-class families earning up to 150 percent of the median income and limiting child care expenditures to 7 percent of family income, would create 2.3 million new jobs.

Politically, the reason for the U.S.'s lack of care infrastructure is clear: For the last half-century, a dominant political coalition reflecting the common bonds forged between neoliberal economics and social conservatism has blocked any form of public investment in the kinds of caregiving supports that enable women's paid work.

But recently, the U.S.'s long-dominant economic paradigm, characterized by privatization, deregulation, and tax cuts, has been showing signs of cracks. On its own terms, it has been an empirical failure, producing lower levels of growth and less economic stability since 1980 than during the 40 years prior. And amidst the pandemic, the limitations of market fundamentalism have been laid bare. One need look no further than a crumbling care sector to see how untenable it is to rely on private markets to provide essential family goods and services.

> ***A report by TIME'S UP calculated that a $77.5 billion per year investment in care sectors would support the creation of 22.5 million new jobs and spur $2.2 trillion in new economic activity over a 10-year period.***

[3] The American Families Plan proposes capping child care expenditures at 7 percent of family income.

We may be at the dawn of a new economic era — one that acknowledges the centrality of women to a strong and robust economy and the role the government must play in advancing women's economic dignity, opportunity, and security. The Biden-Harris administration has placed caregiving front and center in its economic recovery effort. The American Rescue Plan included **$39 billion** in relief funding to support families and help the recovery of the child care sector, which was decimated by the pandemic. The plan also significantly expanded the child tax credit, providing for the first time a monthly stipend to the vast majority of families with children under the age of 18. The $1.8 trillion **American Families Plan** proposes major new investments in universal pre-K, child care assistance, and paid family and medical leave. Notably, some members of Congress have proposed even larger-scale investments. Legislation introduced by Senator Patty Murray, Representative Bobby Scott, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Representative Mondaire Jones proposed early care and education investments that are estimated to cost $600 billion and $700 billion, respectively — significantly more than the $425 billion allotted in the American Families Plan.

The American Families Plan was not the only source of proposed investment in care infrastructure. The Biden-Harris administration's American Jobs Plan also called for **$400 billion** in new investment in home and community-based care for seniors and people with disabilities and **$25 billion** for building new child care facilities. However, this proposed funding is **not part of** the bipartisan infrastructure deal, making the push for a comprehensive investment in care more essential than ever. With an increasingly aging population leaving the labor force, the U.S. economy will need **7.4 million direct care jobs by 2029** — labor that would otherwise fall overwhelmingly on women's shoulders. Without an investment in all forms of care, women, especially women of color who disproportionately carry formal and informal care responsibilities, could be further precluded from participating in the post-pandemic labor market.

In recent months, we have seen some emerging bipartisan support for the notion that the government should invest in supporting families. A subset of conservatives, for example, has joined progressives in their support for child tax credits and family allowances, public investments that have long remained elusive in the U.S. despite their well-documented **economic benefits** for women and families. Some have **cheered** this development as a sign of progress.

But underlying this surface-level agreement remains a vast cultural divide. Specifically, we have seen opposition to significant and necessary public investments, most notably child care, on the basis that it would "**penalize**" two-parent families in which one parent, typically a mother, chooses to stay home with children.[4]

[4] Notably, those who express concern about public investments in child care "pushing" married mothers into the paid labor force typically do not express the same concern about single mothers' ability to stay home to care for young children.

The opposition to such policies is illustrative of how culturally contentious the notion of women's work — or at least some women's work — remains in some quarters. The COVID-19 crisis has prompted a re-examination of economic tenets that have held sway for decades. Now we must do the same with a set of pernicious beliefs about gender, race, work, and family that have stymied women's economic progress, devalued women's paid and unpaid work, constricted economic growth, and perpetuated racial and gender inequity. At this precarious moment, it is important to recognize that this economic crisis is also a family crisis, meaning that it is rooted in a nostalgic and exclusionary view of family life and prevents us from truly tackling the problems of our economy.

Why Is Care Infrastructure So Essential to Women's Paid Work? Gender Imbalances in Unpaid and Informal Labor

Gender imbalances in unpaid domestic and caregiving work remain inextricably tied to gender employment and pay discrepancies — and the policy solutions necessary to achieve gender and racial equity. U.S. women continue to provide the lion's share of **unpaid labor** in the form of household duties and caregiving for children and other family members. In 2019, women reported spending **2.5 hours** on housework per day (as compared to men's 1.9 hours) and, for those with children under the age of 6, **1.1 hours** per day on the physical care for children, more than twice the amount performed by men.

The uneven amount of unpaid labor performed by women has been remarkably stable over time, even as rates of women's paid employment increased. Mothers, for example, devoted **more time** to child care duties in 2011 than they had in 1965, even though significantly more were employed outside the home. Men spend **more time** on housework and child care than they did a generation ago (and women spend less time on housework), but the gender gap has not closed, regardless of men's and women's respective employment status. Employed women, for example, spend **more time** on domestic work than even their non-employed male counterparts. Such imbalances affect women's and men's respective abilities to engage in paid work and the primacy placed on their respective careers. Indeed, a recent **study** found that 70 percent of the top male earners in the U.S. have a spouse who does not work outside the home.

Over the course of the last year, levels of unpaid household and caregiving labor have escalated significantly, with mothers, in particular, assuming **much of the responsibility** for the increased child-rearing responsibilities stemming from pandemic shutdowns. Although duties such as overseeing children's virtual education should ease slightly as schools and child care centers reopen, the pandemic has made the essential nature of caregiving and other forms of unpaid work abundantly clear and further revealed the limitations of GDP as the exclusive measure of economic activity. An Oxfam report calculated the global economic value of women's unpaid work in 2019 — before the pandemic — at $10.9 trillion. A **recent report** by the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank estimated that U.S. women's domestic labor, if they were paid the minimum wage, would have totaled $1.2 billion in 2020 — an amount nearly as high as the total economic activity of the state of New York. An inclusive and equitable economy requires both maximizing women's opportunities to participate in the formal economy and valuing the unpaid work that is essential to a functioning society.

Obstacles to Care Infrastructure: Neoliberalism and Social Conservatism

Political opposition to **care infrastructure** investments is a by-product of the unique ideologies and interests that have shaped U.S. social and economic policy over the past half-century. Since the 1970s, the U.S. has embraced both a form of market capitalism often called neoliberalism — characterized by privatization, deregulation, and tax cuts — and a form of **"family capitalism"** that affixes different rewards and penalties to various family structures and uses the resulting discrepancies to define and reinforce the parameters of what's "desirable."

In ***Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism***, political scientist Melinda Cooper outlines how beliefs about families were at the heart of the common cause forged between neoliberal economics and social conservatism, specifically the white evangelical Christian churches that, beginning in the 1970s, became increasingly politicized as a right-wing force. Neoliberal economists and social conservatives did not share a uniform view of families, but Cooper's analysis reveals how symbiotic the two camps were. Social conservatives' reverence for the "traditional" nuclear family provided a values-based language to justify neoliberal efforts to dramatically erode the welfare state. And neoliberals elevated the married, two-parent family as a heteronormative family ideal by solidifying it as the basic economic unit of society — the container, so to speak, for individual economic success — and, by extension, personal virtue.

Embedded in this approach has been an intertwined set of **economic and cultural norms:** the expectation that families will provide for their own support with little (and typically insufficient) public support, and the belief, sometimes implicit, that the two-parent nuclear family is the optimal family structure to do so. Together, they have shaped an economy that is riddled with double binds and contradictions when it comes to women's employment, with policy incentives and deterrents that differ widely for women across race, class, and other axes of identity. Welfare reform of the 1990s, for example, was the culmination of decades of stigmatizing Black single mothers, which historically **excluded** them from minimum wage policies and decimated families of color through mass incarceration and other forms of structural racism. By replacing a cash-benefit entitlement with time-limited assistance linked to work requirements, policy makers attempted to push greater numbers of poor, disproportionately Black women into the paid labor force.

In contrast, the policy incentive structure for middle- to upper-middle-class, disproportionately white women has encouraged them to stay home with young children, even as **stagnating wage growth** over the last 40 years has made two incomes an economic necessity for increasing numbers of families. The U.S. tax code privileges families in which there is a sizable gap in income between primary and secondary earners. It is a benefit that reinforces and perpetuates **gender** inequity, by discouraging married women from working, and **racial** inequity, by incurring additional economic advantage to white families whose structures, as scholar Dorothy A. Brown **documents**, are "most likely to fit its mold." The **family privilege** and accompanying disadvantage that such policies help enshrine do more than perpetuate economic inequality; they are devices to promote and sustain structural racism and sexism.

The great irony of the neoliberal era is that the 1950s idealized version of family it purported to value (i.e., married, two parents, with roles clearly demarcated by gender) was simultaneously undermined by declining wages and the erosion of public benefits (e.g., public support for housing and higher education) that enabled its existence after World War II among a certain subset of predominantly white families. Since the 1980s, U.S. policy makers have attempted to reverse engineer this "traditional" nuclear family back into being, through explicit, and ultimately ineffective, **marriage promotion welfare policies** of the early 2000s and a set of **"penalties"** that make single motherhood more economically precarious in the U.S. than in most comparable wealthy democracies.

Whether motivated by traditional family beliefs or the neoliberal desire for public disinvestment, one thing is clear: women's economic well-being has rarely, if ever, been the driving policy priority. The U.S. has made large-scale public investments in care before: the **$78 million** in federal and local funding that financed government child care centers in World War II, and the **$1 billion** the Department of Defense (DOD) spends annually on high-quality child care for service members and DOD civilians. But in both instances, the rationale for such investments was not women's, or even children's, well-being, but wartime economic production and military readiness, respectively. Despite the political lip service that is routinely paid to mothers, U.S. policy has routinely relegated caregivers, especially BIPOC women, to positions of economic disadvantage.

The Resurgence of "Family Values" Crusaders

As the economic situation for women has become more dire and momentum for investments in caregiving policies has accelerated, we have seen the resurgence of cultural attacks that seem reminiscent of a past era. Opponents claim that public investments in child care, in particular, would disadvantage parents who want to stay home with their children and further cement the dual-earner family as a cultural norm. As backing, they cite data that many mothers would prefer not to work full-time — in 2013, Pew Research, for example, found that for 47 percent of mothers, the ideal work arrangement was part-time, in contrast to the 32 percent of mothers who preferred full-time work and the 20 percent of mothers who preferred not to work at all. A handful of conservative scholars and politicians, most notably Senators Mitt Romney and Josh Hawley, have embraced the notion of cash payments to families and parent tax credits, in part as a way to support families in which one parent, implicitly assumed to be a mother, stays home with children.

A society that values caregiving should do so in all of its forms, and direct cash payments to families are an essential part of that equation, if unrestricted and equitably provided (both Romney's and Hawley's bills, it should be noted, provide the largest benefits to two-parent married couples). One experiment, the Magnolia Mother's Trust, which gave participants $1,000 a month over a year, found that it increased the ability of mothers to pay their bills on time, save for emergency expenses, and put food on their families' tables. But suggesting that the solution to the challenges many families face in managing work and family demands is for one parent to opt out of the labor force ignores the realities of contemporary family life. In 2015, 26 percent of children lived with a single parent; as of 2017, 41 percent of women were the sole or primary breadwinners for their families. Comprehensive child care would not push women who would have preferred to stay home into the workforce. It would provide many parents, single and married alike, with the support that is necessary to perform their various roles.

Opponents' overwhelming focus on two-parent families who can afford to have one parent stay home also erases the overwhelmingly BIPOC and immigrant women who provide such care. Public investments in caregiving are not merely strategies for helping relatively privileged women enter or return to the workforce. They are also solutions for the market failures that plague a privatized child care industry, including providers' depressed pay and limited access to benefits. This is particularly important now, at a moment when the child care industry is at risk of going into a "budgetary death spiral" due to low pay and an inability to attract workers. Raising compensation would help the industry meet demand and reduce worker turnover. But without public investment, few, if any, child care programs — and certainly not those serving poor or working-class families — are able to do so.

> ***The child care industry is at risk of going into a 'budgetary death spiral' due to low pay and an inability to attract workers.***

It is ironic, though perhaps not surprising, to see opponents disparaging investments that would disproportionately benefit the most economically vulnerable as mere desires of the "elite." A recent **survey** by conservative think tank American Compass, for example, has been **touted** as evidence that "lower and working class" families prefer cash payments, whereas "middle and upper class families" prefer child care (notably, the survey did not allow respondents to select more than one policy, telling us little about what range of programs respondents would have chosen if not restricted in their responses). Multiple **other polls** have found that child care, paid leave, and family allowances all enjoy high levels of public support.

With no economic case to fall back on, opponents are once again resorting to the divide-and-conquer culture war tactics they have long used to stymie public investments in care, attempting to pit the interests of mothers who stay home to raise children against those who work outside of the home. And although we have, to date, heard less overtly racist rhetoric than in the 1980s and 1990s, when poor Black women receiving public benefits were maligned as "welfare queens'' (even as white women made up the majority of welfare recipients), their proposed policies make clear whom they view as "deserving" and "undeserving" of support. Senator Hawley's Parent Tax Credit, for example, includes an earnings requirement, meaning that the poorest families, who are more likely to be Black, Indigenous, and Latinx, wouldn't qualify. And single-parent families, who are overwhelmingly headed by women, would receive half as much money as two-parent families under Hawley's plan, despite the fact that **58 percent** of poor children lived in families headed by single mothers in 2018, including, notably, more than 600,000 families in which the mother worked full time throughout the year.

It remains an open question whether the U.S. has reached a tipping point, in which political majorities will reject not only the free market orthodoxy that has produced such widespread economic precarity but the cultural norms about families that helped create and uphold it. It is difficult to overstate the degree to which traditionalists have succeeded in convincing the public — particularly political, policy, and media elites — that their particular form of family values is just a matter of common sense. This has been especially true in the social commentary around family structure, in which the talking point that "children do best with two married parents" remains relatively unquestioned, despite the fact that the most rigorous **reviews** of existing research have found the "literature lacks a clear consensus on the existence of a causal effect" and that "any such effect is small." It is impossible to identify with certainty why the idea remains so persuasive, though like neoliberal economics itself, foundations with a vested interest in the promotion and maintenance of the ideology have **invested heavily** in efforts to popularize it. And for many elites, who are themselves more likely to have families resembling the ideological ideal, the claim likely has a certain self-serving appeal.

There are reasons to be hopeful that this moment may be different. Americans today are far **more accepting** of a wide range of family forms than at any other point in history. And unlike 1971, when President Nixon vetoed the Child Care Act, which would have established a national child care system, **large majorities** of women with children under the age of 18 are part of the workforce — or trying to return to it. At a moment in which there is a new appreciation of the fact that most people, regardless of their work and family situations, both need and provide care, attempts to dichotomize the two actions may, at long last, fall flat.

New Policy Priorities, New Paradigms

The Biden-Harris administration's positioning women as key to the economic recovery represents a refreshing, if long overdue, direction for U.S. social and economic policy. Many of the policies included in the American Jobs Plan and American Families Plan would be transformational, bringing the U.S. in line with most other wealthy, industrialized democracies with the benefits it provides to working families, and greatly increasing women's economic opportunity and security.

But building an economy oriented around economic security, dignity, and human thriving requires significant paradigmatic shifts, in addition to policy changes. In recent years, the parameters of an alternative economic **worldview** have begun to take shape, but vexing questions about what it will take to achieve "affirmative inclusion" remain. Neoliberalism did not invent gender and racial exclusion; both have been consistent features of the American economy since our nation's founding. Correcting for centuries of structural racism requires far more than the provision of new public benefits — it necessitates rethinking more fundamental relationships to power, capital, and wealth. Similarly, as long as caregiving responsibilities are unequally distributed and accompanied by financial risk, gender equity will remain elusive. Even countries with more generous family benefits see disparities between men's and women's pay, as well as **greater numbers** of women working part-time and in lower-level positions.

Promising new frameworks provide glimpses of what would be possible in a fundamentally restructured and reoriented economy. **Black Women Best**, for example, which was conceptualized by economist Janelle Jones, Kendra Bozarth, and Grace Western, argues that building an economy in which Black women can thrive benefits all. Caregiving policies are central to that vision, since Black women "have predominantly endured the brunt of care work, a profession (both informal and formal) that has always been undervalued and undercompensated in the U.S." But the framework goes beyond simply advocating for public investments in care, emphasizing the need for policies that build the power of care workers and extend labor protections to previously excluded groups, including domestic workers. Jones et al. also embed investments in care within a broader comprehensive suite of policies, including a federal jobs guarantee and a single-payer health care system, that together would fundamentally redesign institutions in ways that would provide immediate economic relief to those hurt most by the current crisis while building long-term economic resiliency.

> ***Correcting for centuries of structural racism requires far more than the provision of new public benefits — it necessitates rethinking more fundamental relationships to power, capital, and wealth.***

But successful adoption of new economic frameworks requires deeper cultural work, namely surfacing — and rejecting — the explicit and insidious ways that society continues to deem some families as more "worthy" than others, and conveys economic privilege and disadvantage upon them on the basis of race and structure. In addition to the compelling recent analyses of the gender, race, and family inequities baked into the U.S. tax code, the think tank Family Story has outlined the ways that much of U.S. social policy is grounded in an ideology it terms **"marriage fundamentalism."** Earlier this year, Representative Katie Porter revealed how pervasive such ideologies are by exposing the **single parent penalty** embedded in the American Rescue Plan, which set child tax credit income thresholds that were lower for single parents than for families headed by married couples.

Conclusion

For decades, the U.S. economy has been hamstrung by a form of virtue signaling that has become increasingly divorced from the reality of family life. If this moment is going to be different — if we are going to finally recognize the essential role that women's paid work and caregiving both play in building a strong and robust economy and invest in the policies that enable and support their dignity and well-being — then we must wholeheartedly reject attempts to resurrect a vision of 1950s white, heteronormative, middle-class family life as a cultural ideal.

We are at a moment in which common-sense policies for an inclusive economic future are more politically viable than at any other moment in the past half-century. Turning the tide, especially for the millions of BIPOC women and caregivers who have borne the brunt of this economic crisis, requires political action. We can no longer allow this agenda to be thwarted by outdated cultural notions that have long prevented us from tackling the problems of our economy.

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