



## DO THIS FOR MOM

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KIKI, A SINGLE MOTHER OF TWO and a legal secretary, had just moved from New York to a small town in Pennsylvania, where the cost of living was much lower. But first she had to find a job, which was proving surprisingly difficult. Finally, during the 11th job interview in which she was asked the same question, "Do you have children?" something clicked. She dared to ask how that was relevant to the work.

The response was blunt. "He said if you don't have a husband and have children, then I pay less per hour because I have to pay benefits for the entire family."

Kiki, like most people, assumed that this kind of raw discrimination against a person, just because she was a mother, was illegal. She was wrong. The great majority of states have no law protecting parents from discrimination. (Kiki, who did eventually find a job after much hardship, is now working to change

that in Pennsylvania, with no success thus far.)

So it goes in the land of lip service to motherhood. A recent study found that mothers with the exact same resumes as other women are less likely to be hired, promoted, or paid as well as childless women or men with and without children. And that is only the tip of the iceberg of American mothers' disadvantages. Women make up the majority of people on minimum wage. They are the majority of part-time workers, with lower pay and fewer benefits than other workers, including pensions, sick leave, health care, and vacations. Of all people, single women with children are most likely to declare bankruptcy; in fact, "having a child is now the single best predictor that a woman will go bankrupt," primarily because of overwhelming health expenses.

In other words, the current squeeze on middle-class and working families is hitting women with children especially hard, a

reality that is increasingly difficult to ignore. In recent months one of the founders of MoveOn.org, Joan Blades, with coauthor Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, came out with *The Motherhood Manifesto*, calling for sweeping changes in legislation and corporate policy on behalf of mothers. Last May a campaign to promote the book on MoveOn.org garnered more than 50,000 signatures of support, and a new network linking these grassroots supporters through a Web site, [www.momsrising.org](http://www.momsrising.org), is forming. The authors have also produced an accompanying video, with the support of the Service Employees International Union and the AFL-CIO. And finally, more than 100 representatives of women's organizations are beginning to support a broad "mothers' agenda."

But not all of the new interest in "moms" is on the progressive side. Republican pollsters know that middle-class working mothers can vote either way and are counseling a serious economic appeal to that all-important demographic--no doubt spurred by recent polls showing Republicans are losing the so-called "security moms." Another recent book, *Leaving Women Behind*, by conservative policy analysts John C. Goodman and Celeste Colgan and Wall Street Journal columnist Kimberley A. Strassel,

lays out the right-wing appeal for changes benefiting "modern families."

The two books have a surprisingly common critique: Neither employers nor government policies have adjusted to the changes in American family life. Working mothers are here to stay, and they are making an important contribution to our society. Practically all of our social insurance programs and corporate workplace policies are in need of a radical overhaul. Programs and laws designed in the 1930s for the single-breadwinner family are hopelessly outmoded, with their worst impact on mothers. The employer-based health insurance system is broken. Companies need to offer far more flexible work schedules to meet family needs, and part-time work needs to be dramatically improved. So far so good. With all these basics in agreement, one would think we have the makings of a grand reform.

But, as usual, the devil is in the details.

*Leaving Women Behind* eschews the overheated and simplistic rhetoric often coming from the right, but its underlying premise is as ideological and predictable as a Stalinist tract. There is one truth and it is this: Government is bad, taxes are bad, and all things

private are good. Fundamentally, all we need to do is to get the government out of the way, cut taxes, throw out a bunch of outdated laws, and privatize everything in sight (the authors' list of public programs to dismantle includes health care, Social Security, and education). In promoting this market fundamentalist agenda, they use a carefully loaded language designed to persuade the uninitiated. Retirees are shunted off into Medicare; defined-contribution pension systems are more "mobile and flexible" than the defined-benefit systems of old; "death" taxes lurk; and getting rid of overtime pay and unneeded perks will free employers to provide higher wages and plenty of comp time when ever you want it.

Savvy readers of *The American Prospect* know that this is bunkum and that people who buy it are shooting themselves in the foot. But these arguments may sound reasonable to many women, echoing as they do the conventional wisdom we've been hearing for close to 30 years. And some of the specific policy proposals in this book from the **National Center for Policy Analysis**, a conservative think tank based in Dallas, Texas, do address anachronisms that penalize middle-class and poor mothers alike.

The book contains a decent analysis, for example, of the ways in

which the current Social Security system disadvantages mothers, including the rule that no one can claim any spousal benefits unless she (or he) has been married for more than 10 years. This regulation goes back to a Depression-era fear that conniving younger women would scheme to marry much older men in hopes of soon collecting their Social Security pensions. I haven't heard many women plotting that one recently; the conversation today has more to do with avoiding older men so you won't get stuck taking care of them. In any event, the main effect of this rule is to penalize divorced mothers in old age, given that most divorces take place before 10 years and involve children.

The conservative authors offer a remedy that was put forward many years ago by the National Women's Law Center, a liberal advocacy group. It's called earnings sharing.

Under earnings sharing, Social Security taxes and credits earned by either spouse during marriage would be split 50-50 between the husband and wife as long as the marriage lasts. I once had lunch with a prominent progressive male activist and suggested that his organization support this reform, which I was sure would be popular among all kinds of women. He immediately grasped that sharing earnings would mean fewer Social Security credits of their own for married men, and nothing more was said (or done) about the subject.

*Leaving Women Behind* also advocates a tax reform that has been ignored for too long: permitting married couples to file individual tax returns. This would enable married mothers' earnings to be taxed at their own rate, which in the vast majority of cases would

be lower than the rate the couple would pay jointly. The authors are quite right that married mothers pay the highest tax rates in the country, a situation which pushes many working mothers, rich and poor and in-between, right out of the labor market.

The book also contains a persuasive critique of the American system of linking benefits, most critically health insurance and pensions, to private employment, an arrangement that especially hurts mothers, who often work part-time and also move in and out of the labor market far more than other workers do. Just as many women don't become "vested" soon enough in marriage to earn decent Social Security credits, they don't become vested in employment enough to earn first-class benefits.

The obvious solutions are not further tinkering with our jerry-built private systems, as conservatives advocate, but a sweeping move to portable pensions that can be taken from one job to the next and universal single-payer health care, which would banish a whole host of woes facing mothers, including much job discrimination and the lack of decent benefits for part-timers.

The Motherhood Manifesto doesn't address the pension system, but it does come out for universal health coverage,

beginning with all children and their parents. And the rest of their agenda reflects the progressive wish list of measures to reduce the poverty and huge inequities facing those who are raising our next generation. (Personal disclosure: I have worked with both women on these issues and can vouch for their liberal yet non-partisan credentials. Indeed, Rowe-Finkbeiner, who lives in Seattle, is married to a former Republican state senator in Washington state.)

The steps we need to take sound so basic and obvious that it's hard to believe the United States has made so little progress on them. Ours is the only industrialized country of those studied by the authors that does not have any guaranteed paid sick leave. America is also one of only four countries on Earth that doesn't offer paid parental leave after childbirth. (Our neighbor Canada, in contrast, offers new mothers 50 weeks of partial paid leave in the child's first year.) As a result, more American infants are placed in day care than in other countries, despite of a lack of affordable quality care. (In fact, existing child-care subsidies are being cut.) A growing number of countries offer parents of preschool children an opportunity to work shorter hours with prorated pay and benefits; there is no such right in the United States. Affordable child care is unavailable, and existing subsidies are

being cut. It is financially impossible to support a child on the current minimum wage and below, though more than a million mothers struggle to do so. Millions of more educated mothers are told, in effect, take a job and never see your kids, or quit. All or nothing, take it or leave it, suck it up, you're on your own. A more hostile environment for women and their children would be hard to design.

And yet, remarkably, until now there has been virtually no political will for change. The Democratic Party ignored married mothers in 2004 and watched as they voted in droves for George Bush. Nor have Democrats made the larger case for reforming capitalism to fit the way we live. The Motherhood Manifesto contains a hint that it ought to be possible to make that case even to capitalists. It quotes a conservative businessman who adopted a family-friendly workplace after hearing a presentation by law professor Joan Williams: "One of the things that struck me ... was that the order of traditional society--which was God, family, then work--had been flipped in later industrial cultures and it just didn't work."

These books are telling us that left and right agree that our system is failing families. But it is far from clear which side is going to win the argument over what to do next.