WOMEN HOLDING ONE-HALF OF U.S. JOBS CALLS FOR UPDATING WORK MODELS

For the first time in history, one-half of all U.S. workers are women, and mothers are the primary breadwinners or co-breadwinners in two-thirds of U.S. families, according to a report by the Center for American Progress and California first lady Maria Shriver. Pointing out that in 1967 women made up only one-third of all workers, the report states women’s changing roles affect the country’s major societal institutions, from government and businesses to faith communities. It also outlines how these institutions rely on outdated models designed to suit male breadwinners who presumably had no family caregiving responsibilities. Finally, the report concludes that families need more flexible work schedules, comprehensive child care policies, redesigned family and medical leave, and equal pay, to adapt to more women in the workplace.

Every four out of five families today with children still living at home are not the traditional “male breadwinner” and “female homemaker” combination, according to the report. In fact, women are increasingly becoming their family’s breadwinners or co-breadwinners. About a third of working wives in families with incomes in the top 20 percent of all families (not just married-couple families) brought home as much or more than their husbands in 2008 compared with only 8 percent in 1967. Meanwhile in the bottom 20 percent of income distribution of all families, some 68 percent of working wives brought home as much as or more than their husbands in 2008, up from 44 percent in 1967.

Allowing women to play by the same rules as a traditional male breadwinner worker is not enough, according to the report. Too many workers, especially women and low-wage workers, cannot work in the way traditional breadwinners once worked, with a steady job and lifelong marriage with a spouse at home. The report suggests that government address this new economic and social reality by updating the country’s basic labor standards to include family-friendly employee benefits and overhaul anti-discrimination laws so that employers cannot disproportionately exclude women from workplace benefits. It also calls for updates in the social insurance system to account for varied families and new family responsibilities. These include the need for paid family leave and Social Security retirement benefits that take into account time spent out of the workforce caring for children and other relatives. Other suggestions include increasing support to families for child care, early education, and elder care in order to help working parents cope with dual responsibilities.

"Nearly all of our government policies—from our basic labor standards to our social insurance system—are still rooted in the fundamental assumption that families typically rely on a single breadwinner," the report says.

Flexible work arrangements, career paths, and leadership styles are needed that better meet the needs of today’s diverse workforce as well as today’s flexible economic environment. "The conversation is no longer about whether women will work, but rather about how businesses are dealing with the fact that their workforce is increasingly made up of women and most workers today, men and women, share in at least some care responsibilities," the report states.

The report observes that while during the last decade claims have surfaced that professional women were opting out of employment in favor of motherhood, research performed by sociologists Pamela Stone and Meg Lovejoy suggests that the vast majority (86 percent) of women who left their jobs to become full-time mothers reported workplace factors such as inflexible jobs as a critical reason they left.
