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## **Can Work-Life Inclusion Reshape Gender and Ideal Worker Norms?**

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In her exploration of the underrepresentation of women in the upper echelons of organizations, Joan Williams (2004) determined that, “While some women stand nose pressed against a glass ceiling, many working mothers never get near it. What stops them is the maternal wall.” Citing sociological survey data on the gap in pay and promotions between mothers and women without children, as well as psychological experimental data on perceptions of mothers, Williams argued that maternity renders women incompetent, inflexible, and uncommitted to work. Characterizations of mothers who “lean out”, “opt out” or “take the mommy track” that appear in popular culture reinforce these stereotypes.

Although gender scholars have problematized these perspectives and articulate a variety of factors that push and pull women into and out of work and family spheres (e.g., Kossek, Su, & Wu, 2017), the underlying role incongruities persist: the biological and social role of motherhood is inconsistent with the ideal worker role. This state of affairs leaves two primary options for achieving gender equality: change gender roles or change ideal worker roles. Neither course would be simple, easy, or straightforward, but—there’s hope!—work-life inclusion could serve both purposes.

Imagine a business school or psychology department where faculty meetings and events are held during regular work hours. Imagine a dean who refrains from sending (or expecting) emails over weekends. Genuine encouragement of vacations and away messages. Social events that are designed for families. Visible examples of co-parenting. Celebration of non-work accomplishments like winning a bridge tournament or running a marathon. A male department chair who takes a semester off to care for a new baby. Breastfeeding during presentations. These imagined examples of inclusive work-life policies and practices may seem like an ethereal panacea, but what if they were realized? Might assumptions of women’s workplace and men’s caregiving incompetence change?

The normative expectations that underlie gender and work roles and have persisted for at least a century are stubborn; beliefs that women should be homemakers, men should be breadwinners, and workers should work around the clock for their employers are resistant to change. To break through this resistance, the norms about what it means to be a good mom, dad, and/or worker must drastically shift. “Successful” motherhood can’t just be represented by vacuuming, baking cookies, and schlepping children to after school activities, it must also or

instead be represented by engaging in meaningful work and supporting families financially. “Successful” fatherhood can’t be equated with depositing a paycheck and taking off the boots or tie when they get home after the kids are asleep. Instead, fathers should be rewarded for engaging fully in their families. And “success” at work can’t depend on being tied to the whims of leaders and smart phones 24-7, but rather on the quality of work one produces.

My own interest and program of research has explored the subtle messages that women receive about their gender and work roles. These messages—which begin before women even become pregnant and infect women’s careers—are generated from and serve to perpetuate social norms. My colleagues and I have found that pregnant women encounter messages that signal a lack of competence (Hebl, King, Glick, & Singletary, 2007), that new moms hear they can’t take the leave or get the promotion they were promised (Botsford Morgan & King, 2012; Jones, King, Gilrane, McCausland, Cortina & Grimm, 2016), that breastfeeding moms learn that “breast is best” for their babies but that kind of thing shouldn’t happen at work (Markell & King, 2018), and that they simply aren’t good enough moms or workers (King, 2008). It is, therefore, not just the formal policies and practices (e.g., parental leave, flexible work practices) but also largely the interpersonal experiences that seep into women’s daily lives and shape their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. These kinds of evidence and logic further complicate the situation because they confirm that it is not enough just to change a policy or start a new program. Work-life inclusion may in fact be less about the policies and more about interpersonal experiences that are shaped by societal and organizational norms.

So perhaps the starting point of change is to change these norms. If a department chair or dean altered seemingly minor decisions (e.g., withholding emails on the weekend) or subtle encounters (e.g., inviting children to social events), faculty may hear and respond to an entirely different set of messages. The ethereal panacea of work-life inclusion may in fact be possible with small, yet significant changes in the daily patterns of academic life. And, ultimately, these changes may indelibly alter gender and work role expectations and enable gender equality.

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