

Families Facing Untenable Choices

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It is 9:00 a.m. and six-year-old Antonio stands in the doorway of his school's main office. He and his brother Cesar live in a public housing complex around the corner from the school in an urban district that serves working poor families of color, mostly immigrants. Miss Corey, the school secretary, greets him with a smile, asking, "Did you just get here?" Antonio nods his head yes. "Your mother didn't wake you up this morning?" Antonio rocks back and forth. "Did your brother already go to his classroom?" Antonio grins from ear to ear and nods his head yes. "Go ahead on, I won't write you up." Before Antonio's out the door, Miss Corey remarks, "He's covering for his mother. It is a tough home situation, so tough. His mom has two jobs and works double shifts every other weekend. His older brother is in third grade and has been getting himself to school since kindergarten, and now he's responsible for getting Antonio to school, too. They are late all the time."



untenable choices

by Lisa Dodson and Wendy Luttrell

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"Can I be in three places at one time?"

Miss Corey is sympathetic to the boys' single mom who works tirelessly to provide for her children, and so she reluctantly stretches school rules to accommodate the situation. She feels it isn't fair to punish the boys because of their mother's work demands. A single mom herself, Miss Corey explains that, were it not for the fact that her own children are on an "early school schedule" that allows her to drop them off on her way to work, she doesn't know how she would manage. Miss Corey is grateful for her job; even though she "pinches pennies at the end of each month," she has health insurance, paid sick days, vacation days, and, if need be, she can always get someone to "cover for" her in the office if one of her children gets sick at school. In contrast, Antonio's mom couldn't be reached when he got a fever. "We called her employer (she works at a nursing home across town) but they didn't give her the message, and the poor child sat in the nurse's office all day. It breaks my heart."

Antonio's mom and Miss Corey are part of an important and expansive group within the labor force: working mothers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2008, seven out of ten mothers were employed. Based on the growth of the service, retail, and carework job sectors, many mothers—disproportionately women of color, immigrants, and single women—are working in low paying, demanding jobs.

For decades, sociologists have studied women's increased labor force participation, focusing on women's lost career opportunity related to family care needs. Arlie Hochschild famously coined the term "second shift" for women's juggling of family care with work demands. The gendered division of household labor that Hochschild reported years ago continues largely unaltered, with women responsible for family care whether they pro-

vide it themselves or organize and schedule others to do so. In light of this second shift, sociologist Pam Stone describes how some professional women may feel compelled to "opt out" of high-powered professions to take care of family needs.

Our focus is the dynamic of the second—or more accurately, *multiple*—shifts faced by low wage mothers with few (if any) opting-out choices. Service, retail, and care work jobs pay \$8-\$12 per hour, so workers are hard-pressed to cover their basics: rent, food, transportation, heat, healthcare, and utilities. Further, these kinds of jobs are more likely to encroach on routine family time, before and after school, or in the evenings and on weekends. The work often involves irregular schedules and unpredictable hours, leaving little flexibility to take care of everyday family life, and employment in these sectors offers few benefits or career ladders that might mean sacrifice today, but bring better times tomorrow. Perhaps most startlingly, taking one of these jobs can also mean taking immediate losses. Economist Randy Albelda calls this the "cliff effect" of post-welfare policy: even the smallest wage increase can result in steep losses in essential public benefits such as housing, healthcare, and food stamps.

What are the particular conditions—material and social—that moms and children face in the real world of low wage work and family? Across the scholarship on low-income families, we find three themes that stand out. First, research points out how inflexible and often unpredictable work schedules undermine mothers' abilities to provide family care. While higher earnings could offset some of this dilemma, a "market solution" is out of reach for these families. The second theme is the stigma faced by low-income mothers and children when they don't meet the middle class norms of work and school in order to put family

care first. Finally, we explore a theme infused throughout low-income work/family scholarship: how the norms of major social institutions (employment and education) operate according to rules that demand untenable choices from mothers and children. This angle on the work and family dilemma tends to be ignored or, if highlighted, used as evidence of personal irresponsibility and failed families. Recognizing the true conditions facing tens of millions of families is crucial for reformulating work, family, and educational policy.

inflexibility at work

In 2004, Norma described her job loss this way: "My company is a big corporation, and there are no exceptions. ... I had attendance problems because of my son's illness... but I went ahead. ...I pushed it and made a choice for family. No matter what it took, I was going to be there sacrificing a risk of attendance problems. So I had no flexibility with work at my employment...." For Norman, "pushing it" meant taking two extra days off until her son, who had been gravely ill, was in stable condition. She lost her job for "abusing" the company's sick day policy.

The interplay of low pay, inflexible work, and school design, coupled with social stigma, create hardship for millions of families.

Research on work schedules in retail, service, and care work jobs reveals a wide spectrum of inflexibilities. Schedules may change with little notice, overtime work may suddenly become mandatory, and productivity (often involving direct contact with customers) may be constantly monitored. The face-to-face nature of much of the retail, personal care, and service labor markets makes small accommodations like breaks, adjustments to start and stop time, or phone calls all but impossible. Work and family scholars Julie Henly and Elaine Waxman, researching retail workers, reported that employees may learn of their work schedule with only a few days notice. They wrote, for these workers, "Everything is open. Nothing is consistent." Just as Norma described, employees find almost no room for negotiation, regardless of the gravity of a family need.

In the past, the rigidity and unpredictability of these jobs led many mothers who had no savings, family money, or higher-earning spouse to turn to welfare if their children needed more intensive care. But by the late 1990s, the policy for low-income moms became "work first." Mothers had to negotiate family care based on the hard terms set by the low-wage labor market.

Deborah spoke of how she once used welfare to navigate family and job demands, believing children "should be with someone who's about raising them." By 2002, new welfare regulations meant Deborah saw no choice but to take a low-wage job, even though her childcare arrangements were "sub par."

This is a hidden layer of risk that arises when inflexible work

is coupled with insufficient income to buy good childcare. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, only 8 percent of infant/toddler care and 24 percent of preschool care is considered high quality. Thus, like many parents, Deborah could find no affordable and decent childcare so she left them in "self care," which is to say, on their own. But she says, "I'm always afraid. I'm afraid they will say something at school [about her absence] and I'm afraid that something will happen to them." Deborah isn't alone. Federal research reveals that, nationally, only 17 percent of eligible children receive publicly subsidized childcare. Many parents, then, are living with twin fears: they're terrified by both the possibility of harm that could come to children left alone and the possibility that they'll face investigation by state children's services for child neglect.

Tayisha discovered something else that plagues other parents: childcare cheap enough for her budget can be substandard. Cleaning out her daughter Amy's bag she found "... all these notes in the bottom of her backpack. She hated it [the after school program]. These kids were picking on her, and the teacher told her she had to work it out. So she would write me

notes about being shoved around, spat at..." Trying to handle the abuse on her own, Amy had apparently written down what was happening to her, but didn't pass along the notes in order to protect her mother. Coming upon these frequent, painful, but hidden moments in her daughter's life led Tayisha to quit her job. She had little else to fall back on and nothing in the bank. But Tayisha said, "I don't care what ... I am not going to have her be in a situation like that." Tayisha knew that her job supervisor regarded the abrupt quit a confirmation of her poor work ethic.

Pointedly, the growing demand for all kinds of care work draws low wage mothers' caring labor out of the family and into the labor market. Antonio's mom and so many others like her face this paradox. One nurse's aide said the supervisors in her nursing home workplace "kind of make you feel like 'We're first and your family's second.'"

Inflexible, family-unfriendly, low-paid jobs create a minefield of bad options for millions of families. Yet, it gets worse because mothers and children find that the strategies they design to try to handle these tough conditions can lead to multiple layers of stigma. Studying workplace discrimination, legal scholar Joan Williams notes, "professional women who request a flexible schedule find themselves labeled as uncommitted. Low-wage mothers, for whom no flexibility is available, find themselves stigmatized as irresponsible workers when they need time off in order to be responsible mothers."

stigma

"They (teachers) see it as we aren't being responsible if we don't attend [meetings] and all that."



Low-wage working mothers find that while they are fencing with inflexible work demands, they must also contend with the contemporary standards of “good mothering.” Numerous sociological studies have documented class differences in the meaning of good mothering. Poverty researchers Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas have written, “Ask a middle-class woman if she’s a good mother, and she’ll likely reply, ‘Ask me in twenty years,’ for then she will know her daughter’s score on the SAT, the list of college acceptances she has garnered, and where her career trajectory has led. ... Ask a poor woman whether she’s a good mother, and she’ll likely point to how clean and well-fed her children are, or how she stands by them through whatever problems come their way.”

Middle-class working moms are operating in the world of *hurried* childhood, aimed at creating early academic and social wins. The standard for them requires countless extracurricular activities and skill enhancement to give children a competitive edge throughout life. Family sociologist Annette Lareau describes the demands that this intense schedule places on both children and parents, primarily mothers. By contrast, low-income moms are operating in the world of *adultified* childhood, in which children join the “heavy lifting” in the service of family survival. In these conditions, “girls’ family labor” has long been a critical, if largely ignored, alternative source of family work. Family and poverty scholar Linda Burton’s work on youth in low income families explores how the *adultification* of children is a critical family coping strategy, yet is out of sync with contemporary expectations of intense and early achievement for future success.

“It’s yours to take care of, and that means your kids come first. That’s it, there’s no other way... In the end you got to choose.”

This is the world that Antonio, Cesar, and their mother inhabit. They know their “out of sync” care strategies are stigmatized. Low-income school children, perhaps very involved in family care that pulls them out of school, can easily run into conflict with authorities, attitudes, and regulations in their schools. Indeed, a U.S. Department of Education survey of drop-out rates indicates that shouldering family responsibilities plays a major role in kids’ decisions to leave school. Importantly, low-income youth recognize the stigma that surrounds their families’ ways of getting by; they’re attuned to social judgment. Sociologist of childhood Barrie Thorne has documented that children hear adult talk at home and at school, and they learn how to listen for and read signs of anxiety and stigma. Antonio heard the sympathetic Miss Corey describe how he was “covering for his mother.” Her words were a kindness, but one tinged with implications of maternal deficiency. Very early in their lives, children sense the public scrutiny that their working poor mothers face and will attempt to protect them (as Amy did when she hid the notes that would upset her mother). Or children may actively duplicate the stigmatized family ethic, treating the immediate care needs of siblings, parents, even extended family as immediate priority. Yet, just as job supervisors regard mothers engaging in such behavior as “abusing” the system, teachers and school authorities may regard children as uncooperative with school rules and uninterested in getting an education.

Mothers may also find themselves regarded as uncommitted to their children’s education by those pointing to their lack of parental participation in school activities. Focusing on the hidden work of mothers, researchers Alison Griffith and Dorothy Smith argue that unequal educational opportunities are built into the contemporary institution of schooling that expects “mothering for schooling,” or maternal involvement, to be inte-

gral to children’s progress. No-show mothers (and their kids) are known by school authorities. Studying urban schools, Michelle Fine quotes a mother who recognizes this attitude, “Society says you’re supposed to know what your children are doing at all time. It’s not so. I take 2 hours to travel to work, 2 hours to travel back and I’m on my feet 10 hours a day.”

We heard the same story in our research. For example, Atlanta, a mother of three in Denver, described a 19-hour day. First she gets one child off to school, and then “I get back and get my older daughters off to their school. So then I can do ... any extra jobs [under the table manicuring] and then pick her up and later her sisters can watch her and then I go to work at 5PM. I do cleaning office buildings at this point; it starts late so I can spend a little time before.” She works until midnight. “I don’t

even think about ever getting sick.”

Cultural critic Joan Morgan describes the “strongblack-woman” image (which extends its cultural reach to ethnic minority, immigrant, and even working class white women) as one that celebrates a capacity to endure hardship and pain. It’s true that, in the face of such challenges, Atlanta took pride in her child-rearing accomplishments and her older daughters took pride in their skills as substitutes when their mother needed them. Yet, these are hardly recognized as essential capabilities or remarkable achievements in most work and family and schooling discourse. In fact, these caring strategies may even be turned into their opposite, treated as signs of negligent parenting and inappropriately adultified children, stigmatizing both mothers and children.

untenable choices

“Don’t expect ‘them’ to get it cause ‘they’ don’t ...and they don’t matter ...in the end you got to choose.”

Mothers and children, trying to manage inflexible work and school demands, without sufficient income to purchase help, face untenable choices. Mothers are pulled to spend more time at work to meet supervisors’ expectations and to bring in more sorely needed income. They may turn to children to manage daily household needs and younger children’s care. But, in the intensified world of high stakes schooling and extracurricular engagement, siphoning off young people’s time and attention to provide family care can cost them dearly. Youngsters are aware of the stakes; they hear talk about achievement and failure all the time and are constantly advised to focus on scoring and winning. In both work and school cultures, the focus on individual effort and personal gain is primary. Yet, in a context in which keeping a family intact may depend on practices that include consciously putting self aside for family needs, mothers and children who put care first may find that themselves viewed as deficient, even deviant.

The sociologist Judith Hennessey describes a “moral hierarchy” that guides low-income mothers as they try to manage their choices; mothers commonly say, “children come first.” In our research, this language of priority comes up often. We believe that this assertion of primacy of caring for others reflects extreme work, family, and education conditions. It is, ultimately, about survival. Social theorist Patricia Hill Collins, describing how women of color approach family care, asserts, “Without women’s motherwork, communities would not survive.” Choosing children (and in the children’s case, sometimes choosing family care) “first” can be seen as an assertion of the family’s right to continue to even be a family tomorrow.

The interplay of low pay, inflexible work, and school design, coupled with social stigma, create untold hardship for millions of low-income families. These forces also set the stage for the people who live in and care for these families to question the priorities of major social institutions. Reflecting this, in a low-income mothers’ group discussion in 2005, we heard a woman offer advice: “It’s yours to take care of, and that means your kids

come first. That’s it, there’s no other way. Don’t expect ‘them’ to get it cause ‘they’ don’t ... and they don’t matter ...in the end you got to choose.” All the other mothers nodded as if they knew who “they” were.

private troubles, collective responsibilities

Echoes of the private troubles these difficult care choices create, the structural barriers that must be overcome, and a call for “them” to “get it” are heard from wage-poor, working mothers throughout sociological literature. If “they” are government entities, responsible for the good of the people, establishing a sustainable wage and also providing subsidies to reach it would make a significant difference. If “they” are employers, whose market success rests on the larger society, investing in families by providing work flexibility would go a long way to support that society. If “they” are public education leaders who oversee the route to social mobility, then integrating the real conditions of low-income youth into school policies and practices would help provide equity. But, for now, none of these powerful social institutions demonstrates a commitment to address the real conditions facing low-wage families.

Taking care of family remains a private enterprise in the U.S. Antonio’s mother must rely on working multiple shifts, self-care by Antonio and his brother, and self-styled flexibilities, while other families can purchase services to take care of family needs. Yet, the focus on private strategies for untenable choices, some stigmatized and others affirmed, diverts us from the collective responsibility we share for the care of all families.

recommended resources

Ajay Chaudray. *Putting Children First: How Low-Wage Working Mothers Manage Childcare* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2004). A revealing ethnography describing mothers’ daily work and family dilemmas.

Arlie Hochschild and Barbara Ehrenreich (eds.). *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (Granata Books, 2003). Illustrates global market reliance on women’s low-wage labor and its eroding effects on families and societies.

Evelyn Nakano Glenn. *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Harvard University Press, 2010). A critical view of the organization of care labor and how it persistently reproduces gender and racial inequality.

Madonna Harrington Meyer. *Care Work: Gender Labor and the Welfare State* (Routledge, 2000). A wide-ranging volume revealing the clash of market demands, private care responsibilities, and the retreat of social welfare.

Rosanna Hertz and Nancy Marshall (eds.). *Working Families: The Transformation of the American Home* (University of California Press, 2001). Cutting-edge essays exploring issues in work and family from scholarly, business, and children’s perspectives.

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