

1865

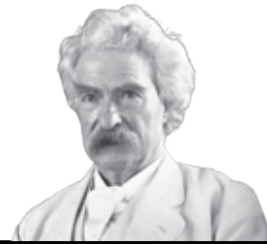
**American Civil War:** Union forces under Major General William T. Sherman set the South Carolina State House on fire during the burning of Columbia.

1873

Bulgarian revolutionary leader **Vasil Levski** is executed by hanging in Sofia by the Ottoman authorities.

1878

**John Tunstall** is murdered by outlaw Jesse Evans, sparking the Lincoln County War in Lincoln County, New Mexico.



1885

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by **Mark Twain** is published in the United States.

# The real mommy war is against the State

*Stop blaming yourselves. Blame the total lack of social supports*



CAITLYN COLLINS

A lawyer and I stepped into a windowless conference room in her office building in Washington, DC, and she reflexively closed the door. I had forgotten to restock my tissues and would soon regret that. By then, I had been interviewing American mothers about their work-family conflict for several weeks. I asked women I had just met what their bosses said to them when they announced a pregnancy, what their parental leave was like, if they could ever work remotely when a child was sick.

This time, I didn't get even 20 minutes into the conversation before the woman I was interviewing dissolved in tears.

She recalled scrambling after her son was born to accomplish two tasks: "knitting back together" from her C-section and assembling a patchwork of enough disability leave, vacation and sick days, and unpaid time off to rest briefly and care for her infant son before returning to work. The United States is the only country in the industrialised world without federally mandated paid maternity leave. This do-it-yourself approach is often the only option.

"You could have children, but the general expectation was, if you made that choice, you needed to have a plan for someone else to care for them," the lawyer in Washington told me.

Since 2011, I've interviewed 135 middle-class employed mothers in Sweden, Germany, Italy and the United States to understand their work-family conflict. (I spoke to mothers specifically because in wealthy nations, mothers have historically been the focus of work-family policies and they're still responsible for most housework and child care. They report greater work-family conflict and they use work-family policies more often than men.) And I had a personal interest: I'd watched my own mother struggle to navigate her work and family obligations — a decade long juggling act that involved occasionally toting my sister and me to boardroom meetings to nap in sleeping bags when babysitters fell ill or schools closed. Years later, it seemed as though the conflict hadn't eased for many of my peers.

In the United States, almost every woman I interviewed had reached the same conclusion: It was her — or her and her partner's — responsibility to figure out child care, cobble together a leave of absence (often unpaid), get on a preschool waiting list, find a baby-sitter, seek advice from friends and acquaintances, and engineer



any number of other highly improvised coping techniques. In the lawyer's case, this meant, among other things, joining a less prestigious firm that demanded fewer hours and finding the right hands-free breast pump to multitask in her cubicle. The common thread in every conversation was that the parents had to solve their problem themselves, no matter how piecemeal the solutions.

That all makes perfect (if outrageous) sense: The United States has the least generous benefits, the lowest public commitment to caregiving, one of the highest wage gaps between employed men and women, and among the highest maternal and child poverty rates of any Western industrialised nation.

In the course of my interviews, I discovered that American working mothers generally blame themselves for how hard their lives are. They take personal responsibility for problems that European mothers recognise as having external causes. The lesson here isn't for overwhelmed American parents to look longingly across the Atlantic; it's to emulate the Swedes, Germans and Italians by harbouring the reasonable expectation that the state will help.

All the American mothers I interviewed said they felt enor-

**The United States has the least generous benefits, the lowest public commitment to caregiving, one of the highest wage gaps between employed men and women.**

mous guilt and tension between their work and family commitments. So did the Italians. But Italian women tended to blame the government for their problems: "Social benefits? Zero. Less than zero. Nobody helps me," laughed one woman I met, a single mother working at a hospital in Rome. "Does the government help me? No," she said, "but they should think about helping you a little bit."

In Sweden, working mothers I spoke with wanted full gender equality and expected to seamlessly combine paid work and child rearing. Mothers there also anticipated that the government would support them in these endeavours — and that's exactly what the Swedish state, its work-family policy, and the country's cul-

tural ideals about work and motherhood do. When Swedish mothers feel stressed, they tend to blame the country's lofty expectations of what parenting should be. German mothers ascribed their work-family juggling act, with its emphasis on traditional home life, to outdated cultural ideals.

When the more advantaged American women in my study described the work-family policies their companies offered — flexible schedules and paid maternity leave being the two mainstays — they used such terms as "being very lucky" or "feeling privileged." This privatised approach taken by the United States government and employers exacerbates inequalities among workers. Some elite employers elect to offer helpful work-family policies, meaning only certain workers — typically highly educated, salaried employees — receive these supports. The employees most in need of support, however — vulnerable hourly-wage workers — are the ones least likely to enjoy any work-family benefits. The highest-income earners in the United States are 3.5 times as likely to have access to paid family leave as those at the bottom of the pay scale.

After three months of interviews with mothers in Sweden, I was heartened to discover that the country in many ways

lives up to its image as a place where women come closest to having successful careers and fulfilling family lives. But consider the national policy focus responsible for that lifestyle: Sweden prizes gender neutrality, universal child care and a "dual earner-carer" model that features women and men equally sharing breadwinning and child-rearing roles.

Women in Stockholm seemed confused or laughed out loud when I used the term "working mother." "I don't think that expression exists in Swedish," an urban planner and mother of two told me. "It's not like there's a 'nonworking mother,'" she said. "I mean, what else would she do?"

But we can't simply import social policies and hope they'll have the same effect in a different context. For instance, American parents tend to marvel at Germany's comparatively luxurious-sounding three-year parental leave, which was available to new parents, for decades. So I was taken aback when many working mothers in Germany told me they despised the policy because of the cultural stigma it heaped on their shoulders to not return to work until they absolutely had to. A teacher who went back to work before the end of the allowable parental leave described people telling her: "You cannot do this. You are selfish, you're a career whore."

"Balance" is a term that came up relentlessly in my conversations with women in the United States. But framing work-family conflict as a problem of imbalance is merely an individualised way to justify a nation of mothers engulfed in stress. It fails to recognise how institutions contribute to this anxiety.

The stress that American parents feel is an urgent political issue, so at least part of the solution must be political as well. We have a social responsibility to solve work-family conflict. Let's start with paid parental leave and high-quality, affordable child care as national priorities.

Women — again, on this side of the Atlantic — routinely assume it's their duty to stitch together time off after childbirth. Those fortunate to qualify for parental-leave benefits — even two months at full pay, or six weeks at partial pay — feel real gratitude for such slim provisions. And in a country where most women (too often the poor and racial-ethnic minorities) receive no paid leave at all, that gratitude makes sense. But being able to work and raise the next generation of taxpayers and employees should never be deemed a matter of mere "luck."

Everyone should feel entitled to more.

(Caitlyn Collins is an assistant professor of sociology at Washington University in St Louis and the author of "Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving," from which this essay is adapted.)



TOP  
4  
TWEETS

01



...The U.S. does not want to watch as these ISIS fighters permeate Europe, which is where they are expected to go. We do so much, and spend so much - Time for others to step up and do the job that they are so capable of doing. We are pulling back after 100% Caliphate victory!

@realDonaldTrump

02



Afghanistan to UNSC: call on the Government of Pakistan to take decisive action against known terrorist and extremist groups on its territory, which pose a common threat to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region

@sidhant

03



The President's national emergency declaration is completely unnecessary and a waste of taxpayer resources. This is a crisis of his own making.

@KamalaHarris

04



The world keeps getting older, but Africa stays the same age. It sounds confusing, but it makes sense when you break it down

@BillGates

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