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CHAPTER 1

SOS

Let's face it: it's harder to be a working mother in the United States than in any other country in the developed world. The US has the least generous benefits, the lowest public commitment to caregiving, the greatest time squeeze on parents, the highest wage gap between employed men and women, and the highest maternal and child poverty rates. Alongside Papua New Guinea, it is one of two countries on the planet without federally mandated paid maternity leave. It is the only industrialized nation with no minimum standard for vacation and sick days. Most US companies don't offer any policies to support the caregiving responsibilities of their workers.¹

It's no exaggeration to say that women's work-family conflict is a national crisis. Seventy percent of US mothers with children under age eighteen work outside the home. Most work full time.² Yet women still complete the lion's share of child-rearing and housework, which means that moms work a "second shift" after their regular workday ends.³ Mothers are overwhelmed. Their partners know it. Their kids know it. So do their colleagues, employers, relatives, and friends. And the crisis transcends boundaries of race, class, region, and religion.

The great news is that it doesn't have to be this way. Alternatives to the seemingly intractable hardships that women with children face do exist. This book pushes the work-family debate across national borders to discuss policy solutions to mothers' overwhelm. I draw on wisdom gleaned from five years of conversations with 135 employed mothers in Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States to understand what they believe helps and hinders their work-family conflict. I identify what other countries are doing right—and wrong—in trying to resolve women's struggles.

Mothers' tribulations are central to this book. But this is not a chronicle of their despair. Their stories call us to action. Women's work-family conflict perpetually dominates the pages and airwaves of US media outlets. Each election cycle features heated debates about work-family supports. Yet folks in the States have seen little in the way of policy reform after elections end. The truth is that mothers in the US are drowning in stress. To be sure, moms with more resources can keep their heads a bit higher above the floodwaters than those with less capital to marshal in times of need. But no woman escapes the deluge entirely.

This begs the question: Why has the US done so little to support parents? The truth is, it's not an accident. And it's not the case everywhere in the world. Historians and sociologists teach us that the United States was founded on the ethos of individualism.⁴ Today, the belief in personal responsibility is woven into the fabric of our country through our welfare state provisioning.⁵ We can think of welfare states as "interventions by the state in civil society to alter social and market forces."⁶ The US welfare state centers on the liberal belief that the market provides for citizens' welfare; the state should intervene only when the market fails. This free-market approach means that adults are encouraged to work and to find private solutions for child-rearing and housework.

The principle of personal responsibility is central to American society, and it underlies the country's social policies. The US is one of the few nations with no mention of the word "family" in its constitution.⁷ Unlike most industrialized countries, it has no federal body dedicated specifically to family issues.⁸ The country has no explicit national family policy. The federal government doesn't have any universal programs for work and family provisions, and it doesn't require employers to provide them. The limited policies available (mostly cash and in-kind transfer programs), what those in the US call welfare, are generally available only to the country's poorest.⁹

The message here is this: if you have a family, it's your job and yours alone to support it. Economist Nancy Folbre contends that US culture views having children as a lifestyle choice, much like having a pet. If you don't have the time or money to care for a pet, or a child, you shouldn't have one.¹⁰ This line of reasoning meshes well with the tenets of

individualism and principles of free-market capitalism.¹¹ But of course pets and children aren't the same. Children provide crucial benefits as future workers and taxpayers. We don't rely on pets to one day become our teachers, post office employees, doctors, and garbage collectors. Raising children well is in a country's collective best interest. And yet US society leaves parents, mostly mothers, on their own to accomplish this herculean goal that benefits everyone. Sociologists Michelle Budig and Paula England call this America's "free-rider problem."

The United States' privatized approach also exacerbates inequalities among workers. A few elite employers elect to offer helpful work-family policies, so only some privileged workers (typically highly educated, salaried employees) have access to these supports. The most vulnerable, oftentimes hourly workers—those most in need of support—are the least likely to have access to work-family benefits. Today, for instance, businesses offer paid family leave to just 14 percent of the civilian workforce—primarily white, male professional and managerial workers who are employed at large companies.¹² The highest income earners in the US are three and a half times more likely to have access to paid family leave than those with the lowest incomes.¹³ Many millions of people in the US are forced to make do without work-family policy supports because their employers don't offer these benefits.¹⁴ These days, Americans tend to believe work-family conflict is inevitable. And, following the discourse of personal responsibility, people in the US think women can resolve their stress—they just need to try a little harder to strike the balance so they can "have it all."

Mothers' work-family conflict is *not* an inevitable feature of contemporary life. And it's not the fault of women. Moms in the US are trying their best to resolve this conflict on their own. And it's easier for some than others, given the race and class inequalities that stratify society. But moms are at their wits' end. This privatized model is failing all women with children, women who numbered 85.4 million according to a 2012 US Census Bureau estimate.¹⁵

US senator Kamala Harris suggests that it's futile to brood in "depression and anger and anxiety" about the country's inequalities: "I'm done with that. I don't like that feeling, I don't think any of us do." Her

suggestion? “We have to be joyful warriors.”¹⁶ Take up the gauntlet, Senator Harris argued: “I say we go in fighting with our chins up and our shoulders back, knowing that this is about fighting for the best of who we are.”¹⁷

I couldn’t agree more. We need to find a better way to organize work and family life. Can we envision a country in which *all* parents have access to the work-family policies they clearly need? What if we gave families a helping hand rather than collectively feeling resigned or pointing fingers at mothers? I’m optimistic. Folks in the United States are now thinking and talking about workplace supports for families. Work-family initiatives are front and center in the country’s public debates, which were unlikely to make headlines at the turn of the twenty-first century. Now that politicians are talking about these issues, it’s time to push them for real, lasting change.

But what would it look like to extend a helping hand to women and families? Rather than turning to firm-level solutions to work-family conflict, we can look to other countries for answers. The US doesn’t need to start from scratch to envision a better, kinder, more just world. Different countries offer various roadmaps given their diverse histories of policy supports for employment and parenthood.¹⁸ Policies like paid maternity leave have been available to the entire labor force in many European countries for decades. Some US scholars have pointed to Europe as a “gender-equality nirvana,” often drawing policy “lessons from abroad” to try to improve women’s status in the US.¹⁹

Surprisingly, there’s been no systematic comparative study of *how women think about and experience work-family policies* to date. When pundits discuss European social policy on the evening news, rarely do audiences learn more than the basics about a policy’s provisions. It’s uncommon to hear more than soundbites from a handful of mothers, fathers, or policymakers. Sometimes those interested in expanding US work-family supports tend to idealize the offerings available in Europe and assume that they are uniform. There’s a sense of yearning that, across the Atlantic at least, another world is possible. But we lack an understanding of how mothers in Europe perceive these policies in their day-to-day lives. Without these insights, how can we really learn from

European experiences? Transforming life for American women and families will take more than a sense of longing. It requires knowledge and insights gleaned straight from the source: we need European *and* American mothers in the conversation. Otherwise, policies intended to help moms may turn out to be idealistic, patronizing, and ineffective. This book shows what women themselves think they need to lead healthy, happy lives at work and at home.

All Western capitalist countries are facing the collision between new social and economic realities and traditional conceptions of gender relations in work and family life. The conventional breadwinner/homemaker model is now largely outdated, given that two-thirds of all mothers work for pay outside the home in the industrialized West today.²⁰ Different welfare states have responded with varying social and labor market policies to reconcile the modern puzzle of how to divide the responsibility for economic production and the social reproduction of child-rearing. Each arrangement creates a very different picture for mothers who work outside the home while raising children.

What are the day-to-day experiences of working mothers in countries that have offered very different policy solutions to work-family conflict and gender inequality? Such benefits include paid parental leave, affordable universal childcare and health care, part-time and flexible work schedules, vacation and sick day provisions, and cash allowances to parents, among others. In Germany, for instance, parental leave is offered for up to three years and used primarily by women, whereas in Sweden parental leave is largely gender neutral and more moderate in length. What lengths of leave do women prefer after having a baby? Part-time schedules are common in Germany, but less so in Italy and Sweden. How do women feel about part-time work in each context?

This book investigates how women in Europe and the US perceive and experience motherhood and employment in light of the policies available to them. I consider what we can learn from European countries in trying to resolve US mothers' work-family conflict. And since no nation

is yet truly a gender-equality “nirvana,” even the much-lauded Nordic countries, I reflect on what European countries may continue to learn from one another as they amend their policy provisions.

To understand what life is like under the main welfare state regimes of the industrialized West—divergent routes on the policy roadmap—I turned directly to mothers themselves to get their perspective on how motherhood works in different policy contexts.²¹ Listening to women’s voices, to what they have to say about their daily lives, their deeply personal struggles, and their opinions of what they need to be happier and healthier, is the best way to craft solutions to gendered social problems that seem intransigent. By gaining firsthand knowledge of how working mothers combine paid work with child-rearing in countries with diverse policy supports, I expose the promises and the limits of work-family policy for easing mothers’ stress.

Work-family conflict is the product of public policies and cultural attitudes that must change if we are to improve the lives of mothers and their families. In other words, context matters. Moms don’t work and raise their children in isolation, devoid or somehow outside of society, culture, history, and the political and legal structures they reside in day-to-day. Women with children inhabit what I call *lifeworlds of motherhood*—the distinctive social universe of individual experiences, interactions, organizations, and institutions shaping the employment and child-rearing possibilities that women can envision for themselves.²² What mothers want and expect in their work and family lives is confined by their lifeworld—from the largest federal policies and dominant societal beliefs about women, men, families, and work, to the structure of jobs, to the minutiae of everyday dealings with partners, friends, relatives, children, and coworkers. I focus on mothers because in all industrialized nations, mothers have historically been the targets of work-family policies, they are still responsible for most housework and childcare, they report greater work-family conflict than men, and they use work-family policies more often than men.²³

I argue that it’s time to abandon the goal of *work-family balance*. Framing work-family conflict as a problem of imbalance is an overly individualized way to conceive of a nation of mothers engulfed in stress, and it

doesn't take into account how institutions contribute to this stress. Instead, I issue a rallying cry for a movement centered on *work-family justice*. This change in phrasing matters because it *politicizes our understanding of mothers' stress and socializes the responsibility for solving it*. US society has long told moms that their work-family conflict is their fault and their problem to solve, which ignores the broader context of their lifeworld. Striving for balance is a highly personal, inadequate solution to a social problem that impacts every corner of society. Everyone needs care. What we need now is for society to value caregiving, as well as the people who provide that care.²⁴ And not just lip service about how great and important and honorable the labor of caregiving is: it means little as a country to praise families as the bedrock of the nation if we fail to reinforce these values with the material and financial supports that families need to care for one another. The rest of the industrialized world has already reached consensus on this. The US lags far behind.

Championing the cause of work-family justice requires approaching US society as a collective. To achieve *work-family justice* is to *create a system in which each member of society has the opportunity and power to fully participate in both paid work and family care*. The rhetoric of justice highlights the reality that this conflict is not the outcome of individual women's shortcomings or mismanaged commitments but rather the result of cultural attitudes and policies embedded in workplaces and systems of welfare provisioning. Indeed, work-family conflict, like all social problems, "doesn't reflect some unalterable law of nature; it reflects the existing social organization of power."²⁵ Put simply, mothers don't need balance. They need justice.

Sociologist Erik Olin Wright contends that, "While we live in a social world that generates harms, we also have the capacity to imagine alternative worlds where such harms are absent."²⁶ He calls these alternative worlds "real utopias"—viable, emancipatory alternatives to dominant institutions and social structures. In the right circumstances, Wright argues, utopian visions can become powerful collective ideas to motivate political movements. The movement for work-family justice is one such opportunity.

Across the countries where I conducted interviews, one desire remained constant among mothers. Women wanted to feel that they were able to combine paid employment and child-rearing in a way that seemed equitable and didn't disadvantage them at home or at work. Moms need the safety and confidence that come with social supports—at home, in their friendship groups, among their colleagues, with their supervisors, in their firms, and from the federal government. The pursuit of work-family justice means ensuring that every woman has access to support when she needs it, regardless of her income, education, race, or marital or immigration status. Men, too. These social policies are fundamentals, no-brainers. It's time for the United States to build a stronger safety net that meets the needs of *all* mothers, and, by extension, their families.

Let's start by considering what we already know about the role of the government in shaping gender relations. In the United States, opportunities in the public sphere appear gender-neutral. For instance, men and women can pursue any jobs they please. No one is legally barred from rising to the highest office in the US because of their gender. In these ways, the US is far ahead of the curve. One hundred countries still impose restrictions on the types of jobs in which women can work. Married women in seventeen nations are still obliged by law to obey their husbands. Thirty-one countries have laws that designate men as heads of household.²⁷

Starting in childhood, we learn what appropriate gender behavior looks like as it relates to caregiving, housework, and paid labor. These messages rely on cultural beliefs and stereotypes about who women and men are, what they are good and bad at, and what they are capable of. The state itself is one key source of these messages: governments produce gendered subjects by the way they distribute responsibilities, entitlements, and protections to women and men.²⁸

By implementing different types of work-family policies, states reflect and reinforce gender ideologies that are bound up in each state's specific history and culture.²⁹ These decisions are indicative of a state's "gender

regime,”³⁰ normative beliefs about masculinity and femininity that reflect what is “right” and “proper” for women and men when it comes to paid work and unpaid caregiving.³¹ Take maternity and paternity leave, for instance. Italy requires that women take five months’ maternity leave surrounding childbirth at 80 percent pay. Until 2013, fathers had no mandatory paternity leave whatsoever. In 2013, the Italian government implemented a one-day compulsory paternity leave at 100 percent pay. They’ve since quadrupled it to four days. For Italian parents, the message is crystal clear about who “should” care for children.³²

Laws are powerful symbols: they delineate a social consensus about what is right and wrong, which shapes people’s moral judgments and actions.³³ Research by social psychologists demonstrates that majority opinion influences people’s individual beliefs and behaviors.³⁴ For example, professors Catherine Albiston, Shelley Correll, and their colleagues found that implementing family-friendly laws and organizational policies like paid family leave for mothers and fathers can reduce longstanding gender biases in workplaces that disadvantage mothers.³⁵ Family leave policy signals to employees that caregiving is valued, which decreases stigma for those who typically provide this care. Work-family policies thus shape the way women and men act and are expected to act, and citizens learn to govern themselves in accordance with collective cultural beliefs.³⁶

Given the government’s role in shaping gender relations, some scholars suggest that Western welfare states can implement “women-friendly” policies to increase women’s labor force participation and reduce gender inequalities.³⁷ At the same time, others argue that unintended consequences of these policies may create substantial trade-offs in reducing inequality—referred to as “welfare paradoxes”—that simply shuffle improvement and disadvantage around among citizens. In a 2006 study of twenty-two industrialized countries, Hadas Mandel and Moshe Semyonov found that, on the one hand, welfare states with progressive social policies enable more women to work, which we know boosts women’s economic independence and strengthens their power at home and in society. Although this is heartening, the downside is that women tend to work in positions associated with lower pay and prestige.

Working women are underrepresented in managerial occupations and overrepresented in female-typed jobs such as teaching and nursing that pay less than other similarly skilled occupations.³⁸ In other words, the same policies that promote one dimension of gender equality seem to inhibit another dimension. Mandel and Semyonov's study highlights the potential drawbacks of seemingly forward-thinking social policies. Bear in mind, though, that welfare state interventions may be aimed at producing more equality among a country's citizens, but they may not. Other goals may take precedence, such as increasing a country's fertility or employment rate.

Work-family policies contain different assumptions about women's place in society and can aid or impede the larger project of gender equality depending on the context in which they are enacted, the cultural attitudes about women's employment, and the constellation of policies available in a given country.³⁹ Different policies thus tend to serve different purposes: subsidized childcare, for example, serves to encourage women's labor force participation, while long maternity leaves and sizeable cash allowances encourage mothers to commit themselves mainly to the home while raising young children.⁴⁰

By exploring women's experiences with work-family policy in different countries that represent archetypal approaches to Western welfare provisioning, this book expands our understanding of how states use gendered strategies to govern populations, giving us greater insight into the relationship between the state and gender inequality. How women perceive, use, and resist the policies available to them can illuminate how states define and enforce ideologies about women's "proper" place at home and in the labor market. Although work-family conflict might seem like a personal, private difficulty, I highlight the profoundly political nature of these experiences. Mothers' difficulties working and raising children are part of a broader politics—a power struggle. If mothers' difficulties are political in origin, then surely part of the solution to their struggles must be political as well.

Because work-family policies are an important source of gendered messages for citizens that can inhibit or enhance gender inequality (or sometimes both), it's important that we understand the influence of these

policies on mothers in their jobs and in their family lives. The past decade has seen a surge of quantitative research on cross-national work-family policy as countries strive to improve their fertility rates and women's rates of employment.⁴¹ These studies show that work-family policies can be both a help and a hindrance to women. Policies like flex time, telecommuting, and reduced hours enhance mothers' engagement in paid work by giving them less incentive to leave work altogether. This labor force continuity is vital because it prevents the "downward spiral" that happens when women leave work due to family obligations.⁴² Publicly funded or subsidized childcare, paid leave for parents of sick children, part-time work with full benefits, and paid maternity leave make it easier for women to stay employed in many countries.⁴³

Sociologists Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson remind us, however, that many of these same policies "threaten to recreate earlier forms of gender inequality in a new form."⁴⁴ We know that mothers' employment tends to be lower in places with expansive child benefits and under systems of joint taxation in which married couples file their income as a single tax unit (particularly large benefits accrue for one-earner couples under joint taxation given the higher marginal tax rates for secondary earners, usually women).⁴⁵ When women take advantage of policies such as reduced hours and lengthy maternity leave, they are likely to increase their share of cleaning, cooking, laundry, and childcare in the home.⁴⁶ Work-family policy use may also result in less accrued employment experience, fewer working hours, discontinuities in career trajectories, and reduced wages, all of which can damage women's lifetime earnings and occupational attainment compared to men.⁴⁷

Research across twenty Western countries shows that women who use accommodations like maternity leave are sometimes viewed as less invested in their jobs, and supervisors may be less willing to hire or promote them for positions that require extensive training or qualification periods or for high-status and managerial jobs. This in turn means women are less able to compete with men for these high-paying positions.⁴⁸ In another cross-national study of twenty-one industrialized countries, sociologists Becky Pettit and Jennifer Hook found that part-time work—a benefit used overwhelmingly by women—enhances women's

labor force participation but also tends to reduce career mobility and widen the gender wage gap, lending further evidence to the welfare paradox argument noted earlier.⁴⁹ Other family-friendly policies like flex-hours and home office accommodations mean that women put in less “face-time” in the workplace and are often considered to be on the “mommy track,” which is problematic in working environments that seek devoted workers who are fully committed to the job.⁵⁰ These policies may thus be a double-edged sword depending on the context in which they are enacted and used by working mothers.

These international comparisons of work-family policies have given us a good understanding of the various policy structures as well as their outcomes.⁵¹ However, this research is almost all survey- or census-based. It lacks the voices of working mothers, which means we are missing a crucial piece of the puzzle. We need an understanding of how policies are translated on the ground in mothers’ lifeworlds. I will show that policies do not necessarily achieve their intended outcome because there is a mediation process. Mothers use, reject, grapple with, and bend policies in ways that lawmakers can’t fully predict. I examine how working mothers configure their own lives in light of what they perceive as their options, and how these policies work as both constraints and opportunities.



Let’s return to the US context again for a moment, where extensive interviews and ethnographic research have documented the untenable bind that working mothers feel today in trying to live up to impossibly high standards at work and at home.⁵² Societal ideologies about motherhood draw on “cultural schemas”—the shared cultural models through which we see, understand, and evaluate our social reality. These schemas shape women’s opinions and behaviors.⁵³ Mothers in the US face pressure to perform “intensive mothering”—that is, motherhood and marriage should be women’s primary, all-absorbing commitment. This cultural ideal stipulates that women find meaning, creativity, and fulfillment in caring for a husband and children who are fragile and in need of a

mother's loving care. Fathers are thought to lack the nurturing skills necessary to adequately care for a child.

For decades, this meant that women, and white women in particular, were expected to be stay-at-home mothers and housewives. However, African American and other racial/ethnic minority women were and are expected to work for pay as well as care for their families. The legacy of slavery in the US has meant that African American women have always worked outside the home.⁵⁴ Sociologist Dawn Dow found in interviews with African American middle- and upper-middle-class employed mothers that being a working mom was considered normal and natural. Staying home would be a deviation from society's cultural expectations.⁵⁵ The intensive mothering model, also referred to as the "family devotion schema,"⁵⁶ "concerted cultivation,"⁵⁷ or the "cult of domesticity,"⁵⁸ tends to privilege white, middle-class, heterosexual couples with children.⁵⁹

The family devotion model competes with a second, equally persistent schema: that of work devotion.⁶⁰ Also called the "ideal worker" model,⁶¹ this schema suggests that employees' primary emotional allegiance and time commitment should be to their jobs, which reward them with independence, status, and gratification. The belief of the ideal worker pervades modern workplaces, working systematically to advantage men and disadvantage women.⁶²

The prevailing constraints of American workplaces conflict with those that prevail in American family life. Pamela Stone's study of the "opt out revolution" among elite, well-educated mothers demonstrated that the immense cultural pressures for mothers to enact an ideal worker role were so great and so deeply entrenched that women in the 1990s and 2000s left advanced careers in droves and blamed themselves rather than their employers for their seeming inability to adequately manage their work and family commitments.⁶³ Stone's research debunked the myth that women "choose" to leave their jobs. She argued that they are actually pushed out of the workplace as a result of inflexible policies, institutional barriers, and a system that punishes rather than rewards women for trying to balance their work and home lives.

Sociologist Mary Blair-Loy calls these tensions “competing devotions.”⁶⁴ Women who are committed to their careers but take too much time away for their family are thought to violate the work devotion schema, while those who avoid or delegate their familial commitments violate the family devotion schema. This bind is the origin of work-family conflict for mothers. Poor women also face work-family conflict, but they are less able than middle- and upper-class women to marshal their resources or adapt their job schedules to address the “routine unpredictabilities” of work and family life.⁶⁵

Although work-family conflict may appear to be a personal or individual predicament for women, Blair-Loy argues that it’s in fact bound up in powerful moral and cultural understandings of what it means to be a good worker and a good mother, and what makes life worthwhile.⁶⁶ This clash of normative decisions takes a formidable toll on mothers. It shapes the gender division of labor at home and scheduling, corporate ideologies, and promotion patterns and evaluation standards at work.⁶⁷ But whether they decide to work or stay at home, both middle- and working-class women explain their decisions about employment through the lens of family. In fact, women of all social classes cast their job choices as doing what’s best for their families.⁶⁸

These studies have focused on women’s voices to portray the difficulties that working mothers face. But they are specific to the United States. In recent decades, interview research with employed moms has been conducted around the world, and these studies suggest that life is no walk in the park for employed moms in any country.⁶⁹ But from the outside, life seems better and easier for moms in some places than in others. Or is it? It’s hard to say because most research on the topic is siloed within countries. We need to compare and contrast women’s perspectives *across* national borders. This comparison allows us to examine whether and how these cultural schemas of the ideal worker and intensive mothering play out in different policy landscapes. A cross-national comparison expands what we know about gender equality and work-family policy by investigating how working mothers’ experiences vary significantly depending on context. I show how the work-family conflict

described in the US literature is mitigated—or not—in countries with policies that reflect different notions of ideal workers and good mothers.

Cases of Study: Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States

Western industrialized countries fall into several categories of welfare state regimes according to shared principles of social welfare entitlement and homogenous outcomes. In this book, I explore the lives of women in four countries commonly used to exemplify these regimes: Sweden (social democratic), Germany (conservative), Italy (familialist), and the United States (liberal).⁷⁰

Social democratic welfare states—including Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland—are defined by the state taking full responsibility for citizen welfare regardless of fluctuations in the economy or in citizens' economic activity. Their federal governments provide universal benefits and override market principles to intervene on the behalf of citizens to promote equality. These measures buffer people from fiscal uncertainties and weaken the link between the market and life chances.

Conservative welfare states (seen in continental European countries like Germany, Austria, and France) believe the government, businesses, and other institutions all share the responsibility for citizen welfare. While they believe in the predominance of the market, they intervene on the behalf of citizens to shield them from some of the harmful aspects of over-reliance on the market. A strong link exists between work position or family position and social entitlements. That is, social policy is generally tied to earnings and occupation. Families and communities are considered central providers of dependent care.⁷¹

Familialist welfare states like Italy, Spain, and Greece exhibit little state intervention in the welfare sphere. These states rely heavily on the informal market, particularly the extended family, to ensure citizens' well-being. Social protection systems are highly fragmented, and there is no specified net of minimum social protection, although some benefit levels are quite generous (such as old age pensions).

Liberal welfare states such as the US, Canada, and Australia organize social benefits to reflect and preserve the primacy of the market for ensuring citizens' well-being. Most entitlements are determined by need and are awarded only when the market fails. The provision of social support for families is privatized, and all adults are meant to participate fully in the market.

The policies offered in different welfare regimes are highly contested and change quickly.⁷² The European Union (EU) has a goal of long-term integration and reconciliation of the diverse policy regimes across its member states. Different welfare regimes, through their work-family policy, promote different meanings of working motherhood. In-depth interviews illuminate how working mothers are interpellated into these systems of meaning: mothers understand their experiences of work-family conflict in and through their country's welfare state discourses.⁷³ These different meanings set limits on the policy reconciliation and integration currently sought by the EU.

Before delving into the stories of the mothers I spoke with, I want to zoom out briefly and paint a picture of the broad national trends regarding mothers' employment in each country. These macro-level patterns shape the micro-level experiences of the women I interviewed.⁷⁴ Employment rates for mothers differ widely across the four countries: As of 2014, 83.1 percent of mothers were employed in Sweden, compared to 69 percent in Germany, 55.2 percent in Italy, and 65.5 percent in the United States (see figure 1.1). Part-time work is far more prevalent in Germany than in the other three countries. Moms in the US are the least likely to work part time; only 12.4 percent of American mothers work a part-time schedule, while 53.1 percent work full time.

Mothers' labor force participation rates also vary depending on whether they have partners (see figure 1.2). In Sweden, single mothers' rates of employment are lower than those of partnered mothers (10.2 percentage points lower), while they are higher in Italy (11.4 percentage points higher). These differences suggest that single moms may have it easier in countries like Sweden than in Italy, where perhaps single mothers need to work to support their families.

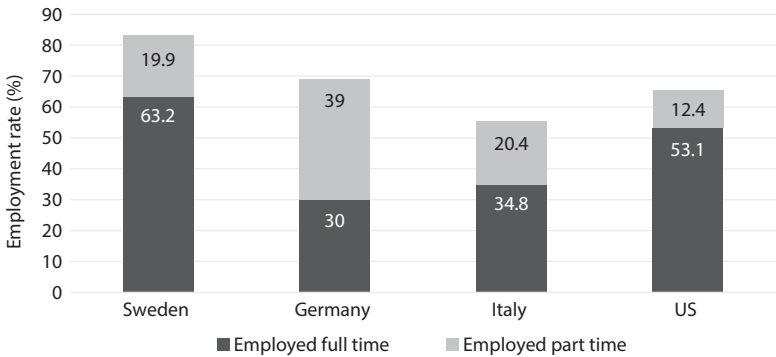


FIGURE 1.1. Employment rates for mothers (ages 15–64), with at least one child age 0–14, by full-time and part-time status, 2014. OECD 2016a; Statistics Sweden 2014. Part-time employment is defined as usual working hours of less than thirty hours per week in the main job, and full-time employment is thirty or more hours per week. Germany’s data are from 2013 (the latest available). Maternal age range for Sweden is 15–74. Children’s age ranges are 0–18 for Sweden and 0–17 for the US.

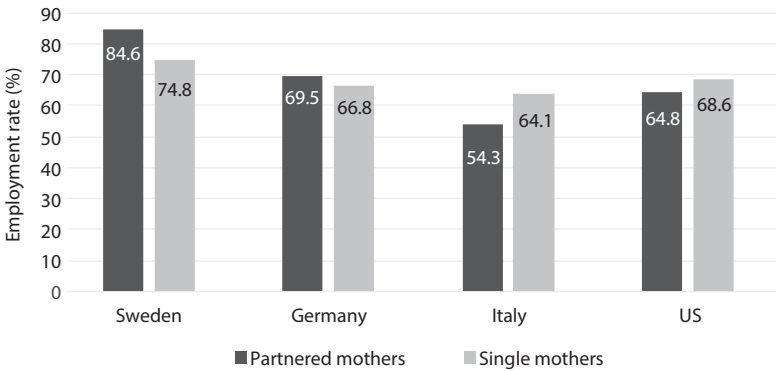


FIGURE 1.2. Employment rates for partnered and single mothers (ages 15–64) with at least one child age 0–14, 2014. OECD 2016b.

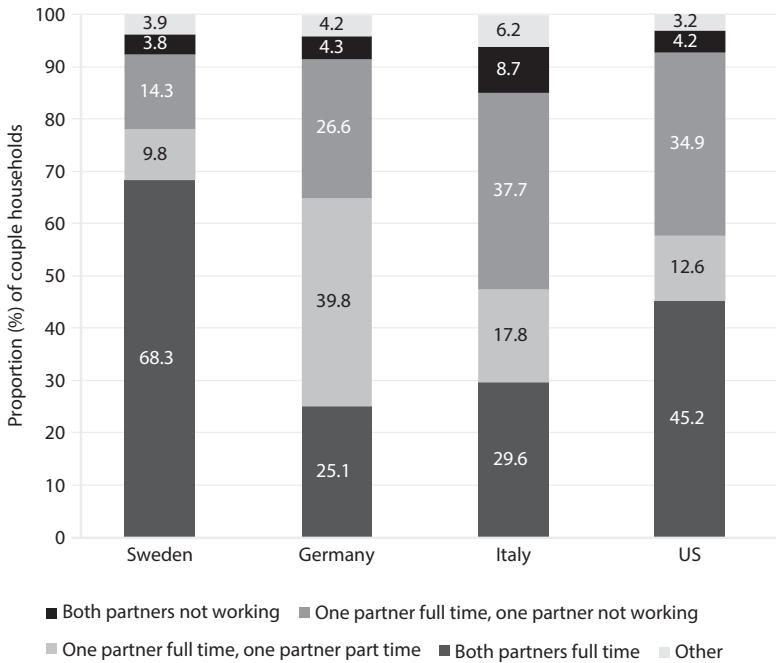


FIGURE 1.3. Patterns of employment in couple households with children ages 0–14, 2014. OECD 2016c. Data for Germany refer to 2013 (latest available). Data for the US include children ages 0–17.

For mothers living with partners, the patterns of employment within their households also differ from country to country (see figure 1.3). Households in which both adults work full time are far more common in Sweden (68.3 percent) and the US (45.2 percent) compared to Germany (25.1 percent) and Italy (29.6 percent). The “one-and-a-half earner” family model in which one partner works full time and the other works part time is most common in Germany (39.8 percent of couple households). That proportion is much smaller in the other three countries and the rarest in Sweden, where only about 10 percent of couples have one full-time worker and one who works part time. Italian and American families have the greatest proportion of households in which only one adult works—slightly over one-third of families in both countries. Only

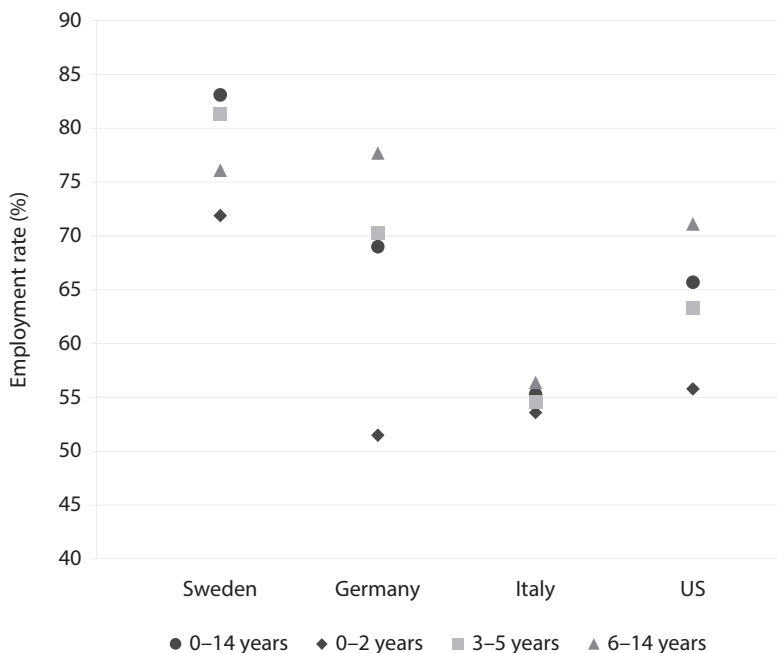


FIGURE 1.4. Employment rates for mothers by age of youngest child, 2014. OECD 2016a; Statistics Sweden 2014. For the US the age groups are 0-17, 0-2, 3-5, and 6-17.

one-quarter of German families and one-seventh of Swedish families have one breadwinner.

Their children's ages also affect mothers' rates of employment in these four countries (see figure 1.4). American and German mothers' employment tends to be affected the most, with the range of employment rates spanning from roughly 20 percent in these countries to less than 10 percent in Sweden and Italy. Employment rates are much lower for American and German mothers whose youngest child is age three or below, with only slightly more than half of mothers employed then.

Another important indicator of how well women with children are supported in the labor force is the gender pay gap. The difference in pay between women and men is much wider for mothers than for women without children in Germany and the US, and to a lesser extent in

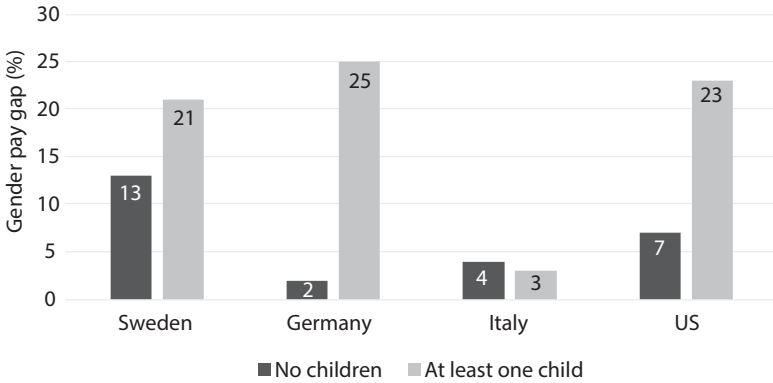


FIGURE 1.5. Gender pay gap by presence of children (women ages 25–44), 2012. OECD 2012b.

Sweden (see figure 1.5). In these countries the pay gap for women without children ranges from 2 to 13 percent, whereas the pay gap for mothers is 21 to 25 percent, indicating a large wage penalty for motherhood. Italy has virtually no motherhood penalty, only because so many women are excluded from the labor market altogether. Italy exhibits less occupational segregation and fewer glass ceiling effects because women with lower earnings are more likely to leave the labor market in that country than in many others.⁷⁵ Recall also that Italy has the lowest rate of maternal employment of the four countries, meaning that a narrower swath of mothers opt into the labor force in the first place.

Public spending on family benefits also differs drastically among the four countries (see figure 1.6). Sweden spends more than three times the amount the United States spends on family benefits, with Germany and Italy falling in between. Sweden spends 3.63 percent of its GDP on family benefits compared to 3.05 percent in Germany, 2.02 percent in Italy, and 1.19 percent in the United States. The types of benefits also differ. For instance, as a defamilialized welfare state, Sweden gives no tax breaks to families (instead prioritizing services and cash benefits), whereas the other three countries do provide family tax breaks.⁷⁶ Germany and Italy

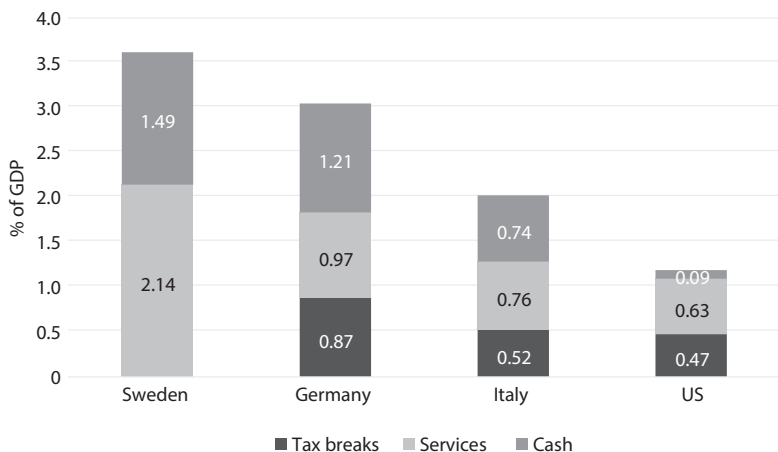


FIGURE 1.6. Public spending on family benefits in tax measures, services, and cash, in percentage of GDP, 2011. OECD 2014b. Note: Public support accounted here only concerns public support that is exclusively for families (e.g., child payments and allowances, parental leave benefits, and childcare support).

provide roughly equal proportions of tax breaks, services, and cash benefits to residents, while the US gives very little to families in the way of cash benefits.

Given these numbers, we could make claims about which country is best for working moms. But interpreting these statistics requires an understanding of *what these trends mean for working mothers on the ground in their daily lives*. Speaking to mothers themselves leads to insights we can't glean from statistics alone. Are high rates of mothers' labor force participation associated with increased or decreased work-family conflict? Does public childcare denote more or less gender equality in the eyes of working mothers? Is part-time work considered more stressful or beneficial than full-time work?

Cross-national research on work-family policy and gender and welfare states are at an impasse until we understand mothers' perceptions. American moms tend to marvel at the three-year parental leave entitlement in western Germany. Yet German mothers told me they generally

despised this policy. They felt a great deal of stigma as working mothers. Some were called “career whores” to their faces. Swedish mothers expected their partners to share the responsibilities of housework and child-rearing, and they did, while most Italian women laughed at the idea, saying that their partners were incapable of helping out around the house because they were *mammoni*, immature mama’s boys. American and Italian mothers often outsourced housekeeping as a way to resolve their work-family conflict, while mothers in Sweden and Germany said this practice was frowned upon—culturally, it was a sign of women’s incompetence.

Studying Working Mothers

To understand women’s experiences under different work-family policy regimes, I conducted in-depth interviews with 135 working moms. I was interested in what these women had to say and what this tells us about how they imagine and perceive their lifeworlds.⁷⁷ In-depth interviews allowed me to bring individual agency to conversations about work-family policy in Western countries, and to understand the interplay between the two. Women’s perspectives should be central to any feminist endeavor to craft, advocate for (or against), and implement work-family policy as a force for positive social change.

I interviewed women in the capital cities of each country: Stockholm, Berlin, Rome, and Washington, DC. Because of its particular history, the case of Germany merited attention to cities in both the former East and western German regions. Reunification in 1990 brought together two different gender regimes—the male breadwinner and dual-earner models. During its forty years as a socialist welfare state, the former East Germany mandated full employment. After reunification, the East was required to adopt the conservative model of the West. The welfare framework in former East Germany today formally matches that of the conservative welfare regime, but it tends to have better provisions for workers and families because it maintains the cultural legacy and many of the social institutions supporting dual-earner families that existed under the German Democratic Republic (GDR), such as extensive housing

developments and universal daycare. I therefore decided to interview women in Berlin in the former East and Stuttgart, Munich, and Heilbronn in the former West. I explore women's experiences in the two regions in chapters 3 and 4.

During our interviews, I asked women questions about navigating motherhood with a career, workplace interactions with supervisors and colleagues, work-family conflict, employment history and plans for the future, dividing family care with a partner, opinions about parenting, use and perceptions of various work-family policies, interpretations and understandings of their careers, families, successes and regrets, and general views on working mothers in each country.

For this book, I also draw on my firsthand observations of women in their homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. I often spent time with their children, partners, relatives, neighbors, and colleagues. I stirred pots of pasta on the stove while mothers changed diapers. I drank wine with women at their favorite after-work bars. I washed soap out of a child's hair while the mother prepared dinner. I walked with mothers and their babies to pediatrician appointments. I ate cake and drank coffee in women's backyards with their friends. And I played in the sand with their children at the park.

I spent a summer in each international city for my fieldwork. These extended stints allowed me to participate in and observe the rhythms of daily life in the neighborhoods where I lived. I got to know families who lived in my apartment buildings and on my block—shopping at the corner grocery, riding the metro during rush hour, spending quiet afternoons in parks and playgrounds, and chatting with parents bringing their children to and from daycare. These firsthand observations provided helpful background for understanding the lifeworlds of my Swedish, German, and Italian interviewees. For example, when I asked a Swedish mother whether she had considered taking longer than one year of parental leave, she laughed and told me that her son would have no one to play with. Playgrounds were mostly deserted during the day since all children over age one were in daycare, “where children should be.” Sure enough, I noticed only parents with newborns visited Stockholm's abundant playgrounds and parks during weekdays, but these places swelled

with moms and dads accompanying young kids starting around 4 p.m. and all day on weekends.

For comparison purposes, I interviewed middle-class mothers. These women provide a conservative test of how employed moms perceive work-family conflict, because they are more likely to have the networks and means to help assuage feelings of stress or guilt, such as paying for quality childcare. Their experiences therefore constitute a best-case scenario or extreme case.⁷⁸ As sociologist Pamela Stone writes, if middle- and upper-class working mothers with social and financial capital and job stability have difficulties balancing work and family, these difficulties are akin to “the miners’ canary—a frontline indication that something is seriously amiss.”⁷⁹ Things are much, much harder for mothers with meager incomes, little formal education, unrewarding jobs, and unreliable or no transportation, and for people without legal residency or citizenship in the countries where they live.

Mothers’ stories here are framed by racial, ethnic, and class privilege. They had greater access to sustainable employment and other resources that are often harder to obtain for working-class women and many women of color—those most in need of policy supports.⁸⁰ Ninety-eight of my 103 interviewees in Europe (all but five) were white and ethnically European. The women I spoke to in Washington, DC, were more racially and economically diverse than those I interviewed in Europe because language and sampling were smaller barriers to my recruitment efforts. Of the thirty-two women I interviewed in DC, nineteen identified as white and thirteen as racial or ethnic minorities.⁸¹

All women were employed when we met. They all had one or more children living at home. I interviewed middle-class women with a range of occupations, working hours, and family structures, which all impacted their abilities to manage work and family.⁸² In Germany, Sweden, and Italy, I also interviewed several women living outside their countries of origin. Their perspectives are illuminating because they offer comparative insights into the country’s cultural and political environment. I use their insights to help tease out variations in social norms and policy supports that may go unnoticed by women born and raised in

each society. More information can be found in the methodological appendix.

This book does not include the voices of mothers who are low-income, unemployed, or have low levels of education; non-English-speaking mothers; stay-at-home mothers (whose labor force exit can be one extreme solution to work-family conflict); women without children (another solution to potential work-family conflict); and working fathers. These groups' experiences of work-family conflict are likely quite different. Cultural norms about parents' involvement in child-rearing and employment interact with work-family policies in different countries to produce a range of intended and unintended outcomes varying by race/ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic class, and country of origin, among other factors.⁸³ Low-income mothers, for example, are likely to feel a lack of policy support more intensely than the women I interviewed because their options to resolve conflicts with private market solutions are more limited. Stay-at-home or unemployed mothers may feel more constrained in their options and less supported by public policies than working mothers do, because access to some work-family policies in these countries are contingent on employment. Studies with these populations are highly needed and merit attention in future research.

Moms in Sweden were the least conflicted and most content out of those I interviewed. I therefore begin with their stories. We then move successively through Germany, Italy, and finally the United States, where mothers were the most stressed and overwhelmed. This book helps readers understand that working mothers' desires and expectations regarding their jobs and family lives depend on where they live. The lifeworlds mothers inhabit are shaped by different norms about gender, parenting, and employment, and work-family policies are part of these larger cultural discourses. Overall, the most satisfied mothers I spoke with had extensive work-family policy supports and felt that prevailing cultural attitudes encouraged the combination of paid labor and caregiving for both mothers and fathers. The least satisfied mothers had to turn to market-based solutions to ameliorate their work-family conflicts, and

they felt unsupported by their partners and the state in cultural environments that suggested child-rearing was women's responsibility.

Moms don't deserve to feel as if their lives are crumbling around them. No one does. Some mothers see insurmountable barriers to happier, more livable lives. And in this case, it's easy to feel hopeless—especially because these lifeworlds limit what women can even imagine as alternatives.⁸⁴

This is where *radical hope* comes in. Hope has always been central to feminist movements and other collective efforts to improve people's lives. Renowned writer and activist Rebecca Solnit reminds us:

For a time people liked to announce that feminism had failed, as though the project of overturning millennia of social arrangements should achieve its final victories in a few decades, or as though it had stopped. Feminism is just starting. [. . .] Things don't always change for the better, but they change, and we can play a role in that change if we act. Which is where hope comes in. [. . .] We write history with our feet and with our presence and our collective voice and vision.⁸⁵

Let's respond to mothers' collective SOS with radical hope—the belief that our world can be different, better, and more just, if only we can envision “a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is.”⁸⁶

Radical hope may enable us to forge a stronger sense of collective responsibility. Recognizing our mutual interdependence might help transcend the tenacious creed that families are personal responsibilities and that raising children is women's domain—beliefs as American as apple pie. Like the countless many who came before us, let's choose the hard work of proceeding as joyful warriors in the movement for work-family justice. It's time to confront the wholly unnecessary difficulties facing too many women today as they work and care for their loved ones.

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