1 Why work–family policies matter, and how best to study them

This book has had a long gestation period: I began thinking about comparing different countries' approaches to supporting working families when my children were babies, and I completed it a year after the birth of my first grandchild. I wish I could say that the situation for working mothers and fathers in the United States is much better now than it was when I started, but it really hasn't changed very much. Families still muddle along, trying to make time to stay home and recover and get to know their babies and doing their best to find decent affordable care for their children without much help from the government. Unless there is a family member who can care for the children, the quality of care their children receive is still largely proportional to the size of their pocketbooks.

Even though many Americans feel that our country has failed to provide high-quality care to all of our children, and President Obama has tried to place universal early childhood education on the domestic agenda,[1] we still rely on a market system that employs low-wage workers to do caregiving work and reproduces inequality with every generation. Why has it been so hard to reform work–family reconciliation policies in the United States? Do all countries have such a hard time reforming their family support policies, or is the difficulty related to something particular about the institutions, policy repertoires and power holders in the US?

A Japanese woman might ask similar questions about her country's inability to provide adequate policies to support young people as they seek to marry and establish families. Why do young people have such difficulty finding decent jobs that would allow them to start a family? Why do parents who live in cities have to wait so long to get their children into licensed childcare centers?

[1] He brought this issue up in his State of the Union speeches in 2013, 2014 and 2015; the response to his attempt to put universal pre-kindergarten schooling on the domestic policy agenda in 2013 has been tepid. Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, joined by twenty-five co-sponsors, introduced the "Strong Start for America's Children Act" (S. 1697, HR 3461) to the Senate on November 13, 2013 (Govtrack, 2013). Chances of such a Bill being passed by the Republican-controlled Senate and House of Representatives are minuscule.

Why can't women go back to work after they take a year of parental leave without being harassed by resentful co-workers? Why do mothers still earn 60 percent less than men? Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the total fertility rate (the average number of children a woman has over the course of her life) has fallen steadily over the last forty years in Japan. But even though supporting working mothers is a high-priority domestic issue, the national government continues to have trouble ascertaining and carrying out policies that effectively ease work–family conflicts.

I could go on spinning out such scenarios. But the point is that for many countries, enacting workable, generous work–family policies is a challenge, even in those that have high percentages of working women, adequate resources, and are acutely concerned about reproducing well-educated, hardworking citizens to help them manage the bills for their aging baby boomers. This book has grown out of my puzzlement over what makes many countries so recalcitrant about passing work–family support policies.

I aim to provide insight into this puzzle by comparing the development of work–family policies in France, Germany, Japan and the United States. Of the four, France stands out for having developed several programs that support high-quality affordable care for infants, free universal preschool edcucation, paid parental and maternity leaves, short work hours and generous family allowances. Germany and Japan face rapidly aging populations and economic problems related to having fewer workers and higher costs for supporting retired people. Both have male-breadwinner, intensive-mothering family patterns, and mothers in both countries have a hard time retaining continuous full-time jobs. In response to lowest-low fertility rates,[2] both initiated policy changes in recent years, albeit with rather different levels of investment and degrees of success. The last, the United States, has a number of tax policies and means-tested programs to help families with early childhood education and care (ECEC), and a twelve-week job-protected unpaid family leave. It invests the least of the four in policies to support working families, leaving it up to families to purchase care for their children in the private market and to save up in order to be able to take a few months off around a birth or adoption. Sparse leave policies and a flexible labor market contribute to women taking short breaks for childrearing – but also to relatively low opportunity costs (that is, the net pay, raises and retirement benefits that a woman loses because of taking time off from work to raise children) for mothering. American women are more successful than their French, German or Japanese sisters in breaking through the glass ceiling into management-level positions.

[2] I use "lowest-low" to refer to countries with total fertility rates (TFRs) at or below 1.4, that is, with extremely low TFRs. Both Japan and Germany had TFRs of 1.39 in 2010 (OECD, 2013m).

Because they take quite different approaches to supporting working mothers, these countries make for interesting and useful comparisons. They present revealing contrasts with respect to cultural attitudes toward gender roles, the structure of their labor markets, their political institutions and constellations of power resources, and the historical trajectories of their work–family policies.

Having introduced my project, the rest of this chapter goes on to make the case that we should care about how well different states support working mothers, and to review the most important issues, debates and approaches that have arisen over twenty-five years of discussion among sociologists and political scientists about how best to compare welfare states and work–family support policies.

Much of the comparative work on work–family policies takes the approach that "we should be more like Sweden," which is understandable: Sweden, France and a few others have adopted generously funded, well-designed policies that do a lot to help working parents and their children. There's a lot to admire there, and I think it makes sense to treat such policies as exemplary. But this is just a starting point; a realistic, pragmatic consideration of how best to support working families must go beyond a discussion of which countries have the best work–family support policies, and consider what is politically feasible in different countries, given their respective histories and political economies. Even if we were all to agree that social democratic countries have developed the most effective, generous family support policies in the world, that doesn't mean that other countries can simply take a cutting off their plants, graft it to native stock, and expect it to flourish in quite different political soils.

Luckily a great deal of interesting work has been done that can help us figure out what a sound approach to thinking comparatively about work–family policies and welfare states needs to do. I draw on the evolving discussion of states, families, markets, the political economy of work–family policies, and historical approaches to policy making to explain what such an approach would involve. I conclude by explaining my research design and choice of countries, and setting out the terrain of the rest of the book.

Why should we care?

Work–family policies matter because they enable children to get a good start in life. In wealthy post-industrial countries today, most mothers and fathers work for pay outside the home, even when their children are small. In the absence of state-provided childcare centers or substantial state support, many parents make do with untrained or overburdened care providers because high- quality care is unavailable or too expensive. Finding ways to insure high-quality care for all children is important because the first few years of verbal and emotional interaction provide them with the basic personal and intellectual skills they take

into elementary school. Children who have not received good care don't do as well, intellectually or emotionally. Children are a nation's future, and insuring they are well cared for ought to be considered a public good (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Gornick and Meyers, 2003).

Further, policies that reduce the tensions between working for pay and working without pay to raise children and do other care work are crucial to achieving gender justice. Women still take primary responsibility for childrearing and housework in most countries, a division of labor that is reinforced by public policies. For example, workplaces that expect workers to put in ten or twenty hours above the standard workweek, pension systems that grant generous survivor's benefits, dependent spouse payments that put a ceiling on how much a woman can earn for the "main" earner to qualify, tax systems that reward disparate earnings between spouses through income averaging or joint taxation are common policies that perpetuate traditional gendered divisions of labor (Osawa, 2007b). But even though family commitments mainly fall on their shoulders, most women in wealthy post-industrial countries work for pay, and many aspire to hold demanding jobs or to pursue professional careers. Work–family policies that make it easier to work while raising small children, and that encourage men to take on some of the childrearing and housework burden, help promote equality in the workplace and at home (Orloff, 2009a, 328–9).

Gøsta Esping-Andersen puts this concern with gender equality a little differently when he writes about the "incomplete revolution," that is, the lag between changes in public life that have brought large numbers of women into the paid workforce and the development of policies to lighten the burden of producing the next generation. Evidence of this lag can be found in the quickly declining fertility rates of many post-industrial countries in Europe and Asia, as women who are pressed to choose between kids and careers increasingly opt to have fewer or no children. Esping-Andersen sees the fact that people are having fewer children than they desire and investing too little in the quality of those few children as evidence of widespread disequilibria that are facing modern societies and leading to rapid population aging in many countries (Esping-Andersen, 2009, 3). In his view, declining fertility is a reasonable response to the state's failure to support gender equality.

We might take the fact that large numbers of young people are deciding not to form families or have children as evidence that social conditions make it difficult to raise children. The evidence of falling fertility rates is an important wake up-call: either states can make those choices easier, or they can face rapid depopulation and aging (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Rosenbluth, 2007). As an editorial in the *Japan Times* put it,

> The resistance to having children is, in part, a plea for serious improvements in the conditions of daily life . . . Few people in any country would consider bringing up a

child under stressful conditions . . . Before more young people will again feel confident in investing the time, money and effort needed to raise a child, they must be assured of help. More flexible working conditions, better child care options, affordable education and community support networks need to be assured. (published on the occasion of Children's Day, *Japan Times*, May 10, 2011)

To be sure, long-term changes have been driving down fertility rates since the mid-1960s. More women have been going on to tertiary education, gaining degrees and skills that allow them to get better-paid jobs, and traditional families – in which women do most of the unpaid care work in the home and men are the breadwinners, marriages are stable and women can anticipate relying on their husbands' incomes without having to work themselves – are giving way to more diverse ones as out-of-wedlock birth and divorce rates increase and female-headed households and families where all parents work for pay become more common.

Understanding declining fertility rates is important for "getting" the contemporary discourse about work–family policies. When women face steep opportunity costs for interrupting their careers to have babies, they tend to have fewer babies (Harris, 2006). From a macro level, this is neither surprising nor bad, given the rising world population and the severe strains this puts on ecosystems and resource consumption. If people in wealthy countries have fewer babies, surely this will relieve some of the global population pressure. But from the point of view of states that are facing rapidly aging and shrinking populations, declining fertility poses problems of declining productivity and intergenerational inequity as fewer working people are asked to contribute more to social security funds to pay for services for swelling ranks of oldsters.

In other words, declining fertility is a symptom of strain and disequilibrium, a wake-up call showing that governments need to do more to support working mothers if they want young women to keep on having enough babies to stave off rapid population aging. But supporting work–family reconciliation policies also matters from the point of view of overall social equality. States that rely on markets to provide care services without providing government subsidies are counting on the availability of a large cohort of workers who will provide care for low pay.[3] But those who are getting paid the least also have children

[3] Care providers include those who care for babies and children, the ill and elderly, but also those who clean, shop and cook or care for the lawn and garden, those who support household work in establishments outside the home, like laundries, fast food restaurants or places that make take-out food. In a different vein, willingness to work for low pay may be related to forms of coercion that drive workers to take jobs: for example, American women receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families – means-tested assistance – are required to find jobs to support themselves and their children, and must accept jobs for which they are qualified, even if they pay very little. Similarly, immigrants to the US and other countries may agree to work for low wages if the employer is not too picky about their visa or green card status. I address this issue more fully in Chapter 7. For a good discussion of coercion and care work in the United States, see Glenn, 2012.

who need to be taken care of, and their care solutions may be quite limited by lack of resources.[4] This can result in children who do not receive excellent care or a great start in life. When countries provide affordable high-quality care to all children, they help to equalize the chances that all children will be cared for well, talked and read to, and given a start that sets them up to flourish emotionally and intellectually.

In short, the problems that drive this research project – the reason we should care about work–family policies – revolve around questions of child welfare, justice and equality. Good support for working parents helps men and women share responsibility for care work, and helps women pursue paid, productive work outside the household (which many regard as the sine qua non of full citizenship – see, for example Schultz, 2000). Well-designed work–family policies address child welfare by guaranteeing all children a good start in life, regardless of whether they are born into low- or high-earning families, and help address income inequality, poverty and social mobility. Further, some low-fertility countries consider these policies crucial to making childbearing attractive to their young people and working for pay more attractive for mothers, as a strategy to address shrinking working-age populations. I propose several metrics for gauging how well work–family policies work in Chapter 7, which compares data on five welfare states (our basic four plus Sweden) to evaluate the effectiveness of their work–family policies. But for now, I hope that I have convinced my readers that work–family policies are important. The two basic goals of this study are to enhance our understanding of which policies work best, and to provide an assessment of the political and institutional limitations on policy change. We need to understand which policies work best, but paying attention to what stymies change is a crucial part of the story too. Scholars, activists and policy makers who want to bring about better policies in their own countries need to confront the historical, institutional and ideological barriers to passing and enforcing exemplary policies. Otherwise, the project of comparing work–family policies is in danger of turning into a fantasy that all countries can be like Sweden or France.

The utopian strain

Indeed, an important strand in comparative studies of work–family policies and welfare regimes has taken this utopian turn. Work in this vein compares states that have excellent work–family policies (like Sweden and France) with states

[4] The lowest-paid workers spend a higher proportion of their paychecks on care than do the middle class and wealthy. See Immervoll and Barber, 2006, 15, 22, 53–8; and Gornick and Meyers, 2003, Table 7.8. One of the consequences of better-off women relying on low-paid women to do their care work is that the children of middle-class and of poor families get very different starts in life.

that do not, then argues that the latter should adopt the exemplary policies of the former. This strategy is not confined to books that focus on the United States; one also sees it in work comparing Japan to other countries and in more broadly comparative studies done under OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) auspices (Crittenden, 2001; Mahon, 2002; Gornick and Meyers, 2003; OECD, 2003, 2007a; Sleebos, 2003; Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Stone, 2007; Yamaguchi and Higuchi, 2008; Sato and Takeishi, 2008; Gornick and Meyers, 2009; Yamaguchi, 2009; Gerson, 2010). The approach is so common and widely read that it merits some reflection.

For example, Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers compare the United States with eleven other countries (four Scandinavian social democratic welfare states, five continental conservative ones, plus Canada and the United Kingdom), noting how they vary with respect to the length of the standard work week; regulation of part-time work and overtime; maternity, parental and paternity leaves; the availability and quality of childcare and early childhood education; and the standard school-day and school-year in the state school system (Gornick and Meyers, 2003).[5] The comparisons are hardly startling – the United States has, after all, long been known as a laggard in this area – but they are clearly and strikingly presented. What is surprising is the implicit exhortation – "We can do better! Look at all these other wealthy postindustrial countries that do a much better job than the United States!" – without much consideration of the political processes that lead different countries to adopt particular policy approaches.[6] No doubt other wealthy countries do a better job of supporting working parents than the US, but those examples are not very pertinent or helpful. Such policy approaches – universal benefits funded by high taxing, welfare states that have substantial middle-class support through dominant left-leaning parties and powerful labor unions – are unlikely to be supported in a fragmented state with strongly pro-business interests, weak organized labor and a middle-of-the-road party regularly trading office with a staunchly small-state, fiscally conservative right-wing one. The approach leaves one wanting to understand why policy approaches that work well in France or Sweden cannot easily be transported to Japan or the United States.

This is a common problem: often work in a utopian vein focuses on exemplary policies that other welfare states have adopted without considering why

[5] A later edited volume, *Gender Equality*, which Gornick and Meyers produced in collaboration with Erik Olin Wright, part of the "Real Utopias" series, makes explicit the utopian themes of the 2003 book (Gornick and Meyers, 2009). Several of the chapters authored by other people in the *Gender Equality* book articulate critiques of, and suggestions about the political obstacles to enacting, the policies that Gornick and Meyers favor. See, for example, contributions by Morgan (2009b), Orloff (2009b) and Ferree (2009).

[6] Their last chapter rebuts several common objections to their policy prescriptions, but it comes across as a bit defensive and dismissive, rather than as a full consideration of the roadblocks to change in the US (Gornick and Meyers, 2003).

different tools and approaches evolve in different countries. At the end of the day, such approaches are unsatisfying, because they ignore several crucial and unavoidable questions and problems. We should and will consider the question, "What are the best practices that any country committed to justice and equality and a good start in life would want to adopt?" But this book is also dedicated to answering the questions, "What gets in the way of adopting such best practices? What do we need to know about a state's political and policy making processes that set the horizons for what policies can be imagined, introduced to its policy agenda, passed into law and enforced with reasonable vigilance?" I argue here that politics matters: passing generous work–family policies requires political support, including strategic alliances among left political parties, organized labor, women's groups, pro-child and anti-poverty groups that are not easy to accomplish everywhere. Political institutions, policy making regimes, veto players and historical factors that political scientists treat as part of path dependency matter for what can be accomplished.

Change and stasis are both parts of this project: we need to consider what conditions favor change. Sometimes a focusing event or change in the configuration of political processes can set the scene for a shift in course. But continuity and incrementalism are also powerful forces that shape policies, and the pull of inertia and the investment of powerful groups in established ways of doing policy are challenges to adopting new approaches, especially ones that represent profound changes. Utopian aspirations are important for giving us a new sense of possibility and actual blueprints for policies that have worked elsewhere, but we have to be strategic in thinking about the best way to build support for new policy departures, and identifying the likely sticking points and how to work past them. We have some hard thinking to do about what, practically speaking, can be done in particular national contexts in order to improve the chances of "best practices" becoming viable policy options.

I have made the case that a comparative study of the politics of work–family policy making is an important addition to work in this area, because comparative insights are crucial for understanding processes of policy change, figuring out the avenues of change that are likely to work in particular national contexts and because so many comparative discussions of care policies neglect these questions. The next section of this chapter reviews work on welfare regimes and work–family policies that has helped me better understand what leads to success in developing work–family support policies. I address several typologies of welfare states, and then turn to multi-level analyses, historical institutionalism and explanations that attend to values.

Welfare state typologies

An explosion of comparative work on welfare states and welfare policies was ignited by Gøsta Esping-Andersen's 1990 book, *The Three Worlds of Welfare*

Capitalism. Esping-Andersen set out three different regime types: social democratic, continental conservative and liberal. He categorized them on the basis of the distinctive policy approaches they take to providing social welfare; the degree to which they decommodify workers (enabling them not to work when sick, disabled, aged, etc.); the role played by powerful political groups (e.g., political parties, labor unions, employer groups); deeply rooted cultural, religious and political values; and the historical roots and development of their typical policy trajectories. The typology still provides a starting point for most cross-national studies of social welfare policy (for work in this vein, see Huber and Stephens, 2001; Pierson, 2001; Korpi, 2000).

This approach has set the terms for comparative work for a generation, producing much work that has piggy-backed on the "three worlds" typology and eliciting lively debates. Feminist scholars have been especially critical, pointing out that Esping-Andersen's attention to policies that reduce workers' dependence on the market made male workers the central focus. They attacked him for falsely assuming that the experiences of the worker were gender-neutral and universal, having nothing to say about the kinds of social insecurity to which women are typically subject, and overlooking the importance of unpaid care work as a social good that both is undervalued and interferes with women's ability to "commodify" themselves by becoming wage workers (Lewis, 1992, 1998; Orloff, 1993, 1996; Sainsbury, 1994; O'Connor, 1996). In welfare systems that provide benefits to full-time workers via social insurance that pays for pensions, health care, unemployment, disability, etc., one's claim to-full citizenship comes from being a worker, and women typically receive coverage as wives, mothers or survivors. Furthermore, welfare benefits geared toward meeting the needs of women in poverty tend to be means-tested and less politically popular than social benefits that accrue to male workers.

Critics developed numerous typologies of their own, based on how well welfare regimes accommodate women's participation in the paid workforce, where states lay on a continuum from male-breadwinner to dual-breadwinner regimes (Lewis, 1992; Sainsbury, 1994), and how well states were able to "defamilialize" women, that is, free them from dependence on husbands or their role as family members (Orloff, 1993; Lister, 1997; Saraceno, 1997). A more recent typology distinguishes male-breadwinner, market-oriented and work–life balance "livelihood security systems" (Osawa, 2007a, 2007b). Most of these new typologies shift focus from the degree to which different welfare states decommodify workers, to how well they enable women to access paid work or to be free of economic dependence on marriage. I think Esping-Andersen's version continues to be the touchstone for many conversations because it "has the virtue of everyone understanding exactly what the three clusters are, even if they disagree on what is most significant in their characterization" (Orloff, 2009a). Indeed, many of those who articulate new typologies end up with groups that resemble his three clusters.

Typologies aim to provide clear, intellectually convenient ways of articulating family resemblances among welfare states and regimes. I find the three worlds approach useful, and use it to organize some of my comparisons here. But I have also learned a lot from what I call "multiple-level approaches" that attempt to explain how domestic life, the organization of the labor market, the provision of social security, tax systems and fringe benefits from employers operate together to reinforce gendered divisions of labor. Below I review several multi-level approaches, and explain why they are valuable.

Multiple-level approaches

One such study examines social policy in four liberal welfare states, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, focusing on families, markets and states as providers of welfare. Examining how states interact with familial and market approaches to providing welfare and supporting working parents in countries that take broadly similar stances, the authors attribute differences in policy approaches to the influence of women's movements (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999).

Echoing some of the feminist critiques of Esping-Andersen, the authors note that women's responsibilities in private life continue to affect their ability to participate equally in public life as workers and citizens:

> the role of families – really, women in families – in providing care has been neglected in mainstream accounts of welfare provision. We agree that what goes on in the "private" sphere of families – notably the gender division of domestic labour and care-giving, but also sexual and reproductive relations – is actually quite consequential for men's and women's performance in the public spheres of (paid) work and politics. (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999, 14)

Even though women in all four of these countries have entered the paid workforce in large numbers, the fact that the only "public services and supports for combining paid and unpaid work" are means-tested has made "class differences . . . quite significant for women workers' material situations and the relative ease or difficulty of organising everyday life" (O'Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999, 14).[7] Those class differences represent a crucial problem of intragender wage gaps and social inequality facing liberal market economies.

Two things are valuable about this study of social policies in liberal welfare states. First is its focus on the distinctive roles that states, markets and families

[7] Many others have remarked on the gap between public assertions of rights and continued female responsibility for care in the private sphere (for example, Kittay, 1999; Williams, 2000; Folbre, 2001; Abramovitz and Morgen, 2006), underlining the contradiction between public discourses about the rights and opportunities of women in the workplace, civil society and politics, and the reality of women's continued responsibility for care work in all kinds of regimes.