

Paid leaves as buffer zones: Social policies and work-life balance among Canadian mothers

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Abstract

In this article, I use in-depth interviews with 26 Canadian mothers to explore their accounts of paid leaves and work-life balance. Drawing from a theoretical framework that emphasizes the structural, cultural, and interactional influences on mothers' experiences, I find that among higher-income mothers, paid leaves serve as "buffer zones" in two ways: they postpone the typical conflict between paid and unpaid work, and they assuage the guilt associated with employment under an intensive mothering ideology. However, low-income and non-citizen mothers have less access to the "buffer zones" of paid leaves, and mothers' reports of work-life balance vary considerably by social class after paid leaves end. Among this non-representative sample, higher-income mothers report the most work-life balance. The paper ends with the implications of this research for the policy and work-life balance literatures.

Keywords

paid leave, work-life balance, motherhood, employment, social policy, intensive mothering

Introduction

Since 2001, most employed Canadian mothers have been eligible for 50 weeks of paid leave from employment. Quantitative research shows the benefits of paid leaves on infants' health outcomes (Rossin, 2011; Ruhn, 2000) and the positive effects of Canadian paid leaves on women's employment (Baker & Mulligan, 2005). Yet scant research asks how mothers themselves discuss paid leaves, and how leaves influence mothers' lived experiences of work-life balance. This study attempts to fill this gap.

While "work-life balance" has become a catch-phrase in business, academic and

policy circles, clear definitions of this concept are often hard to find. Wattis, Standing, and Yerkes (2013) suggest in women's lived experiences, work-life balance is a fluid, intangible process, one that may lend itself to qualitative analyses. Some criticize the "work-life balance" literature because it recommends part-time jobs or flex-time policies for women workers, which leaves in place the "lockstep career regime" (Moen & Roehling, 2005, p. 22) typically associated with male workers. In addition, many criticize the concept of work-life balance for its focus on individual people (typically

mothers) and their personal achievements, rather than institutions and policies that influence work-life balance (Caproni, 2004). However, recent quantitative work suggests that supportive policies and flexible work schedules increase workers' satisfaction with work-life balance (Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011; Hayman, 2009).

Drawing from this literature, this study analyses 26 in-depth interviews to uncover nuances in mothers' discussions of work-life balance. Here I explore work-life balance by asking mothers to what extent their actual work-life arrangements resemble those they desire. This study goes beyond an individual-level analysis, drawing from the theoretical framework of Pfau-Effinger (2004) to explore how social policies, cultural beliefs, and partners influence mothers' accounts of work-life balance. I find that in this sample of mothers, paid leaves act as "buffer zones" in two ways: as expected, the nearly year-long paid leave assuages work-family conflict during that time. In addition, for many higher-income mothers in this sample, the year-long paid leave serves as a cultural buffer zone in which mothers are automatically intensive mothers and therefore protected from the guilt associated with employment under an intensive mothering ideology. However, once paid leaves end, mothers' negotiation of these cultural demands varies by social class.

Literature Review

Drawing from the theoretical frame of Pfau-Effinger (2004), this paper explores how mothers' work-life accounts are influenced by larger social/political contexts: the "gender order" of welfare states and labor markets, the "gender arrangements" in families, and the predominant "gender culture"

regarding motherhood in North America. Prior research suggests that these structural, interactional, and cultural factors intersect to influence mothers' employment and caregiving arrangements (Hays, 1996; Stone, 2007; Walzer, 1997; Williams, 2012).

» The Gender Order of Social Policies

Over the past few decades, many nations created a more egalitarian gender order by expanding paid leaves and state-subsidized child care; Canada has done the former, but very little concerning the latter. Under Misra, Budig, and Moller's (2007) classification of welfare states according to their support for care work, Canada falls into the liberal primary earner/secondary career regime: state policies support women's equal access to employment (*de jure*), but the state provides little support for child care. Mahon and Phillips (2002) describe the child care system as "a system of income support and subsidies targeted at very poor families" (p. 210). In 2006, the Canadian government instituted the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), under which every family receives \$100 per month for each child under age six, ostensibly to help assuage the high cost of child care. However, there were no provisions in the UCCB to increase state provision of child care.

With its implementation of approximately year-long paid leaves for caregiving, Canada departed from the liberal welfare state model that limits state provision of benefits. In 2001, paid leaves under the Employment Insurance (EI) program in Canada were extended from 10 weeks of parental leave to 35 weeks that could be split between partners. When combined with the 15-week maternity leave, mothers who had worked 600 insurable hours were thus eligible for 50 weeks of paid leave, at the replacement rate

of 55% of one's previous earnings. About 60% of Canadian mothers qualify for paid leave benefits (Doucet, McKay, & Tremblay, 2009). While government benefits are capped at "a maximum weekly benefit of \$413" (Evans, 2007, p. 121), which has not changed since 1997, employers can "top up" mothers' leaves to supplement the amount mothers receive. Marshall (2010) found that throughout Canada, fewer than one-fifth of mothers received a "top up" to their EI benefits. Mothers who received "top-ups" were more likely to work in the public sector and were more likely to return to their jobs (Marshall, 2010) than mothers who did not receive "top ups."

For all Canadian mothers, the 2001 extension to paid leave increased the average length of leave, as well as mothers' attachment to the labor force (Baker & Mulligan, 2005). After implementation of the longer leave, Canadian mothers were more likely to take longer leaves, less likely to quit their jobs, and more likely to return to their pre-birth employers than before 2001 (Baker & Mulligan, 2005).

However, the receipt of paid leave benefits varies by social class and by gender. Higher-income Canadian women can afford to take longer leaves than lower-income women (Evans, 2007). In addition, more disadvantaged mothers—those with the lowest levels of education, single parents, and minorities—worked fewer hours, and so were less often eligible for paid leave. Because men's average earnings remain considerably higher than women's, the latter are more likely to take leave, particularly under the relatively low wage replacement rate of 55% (Evans, 2007). Consequently, only about 23% of men took leave in 2006 (Doucet, McKay, & Tremblay, 2009).

In terms of other social policies, over the 1990s the province of Ontario increasingly

required work-related activities for receipt of social assistance. Gough (2001) refined an earlier classification of welfare state regimes to make Canada's social assistance program less generous and more similar to that of the U.S., the least generous program among Western, affluent nations.

All of these social policies—paid leave, child care and social assistance—influence mothers' work-life balance. Paid leaves are only available for the first year of a child's life, and given that they only cover 55% of a parent's salary, single mothers and lower-income mothers should be less able to afford taking paid leaves. All (Canadian citizen) families with pre-school aged children receive the UCCB. Social assistance programs are only available to lower-income families, so they should be most relevant in lower-income mothers' narratives. Therefore, the access to and uptake of these social policies is likely to differ based on women's social class backgrounds.

Other structural components of the "gender order"—such as education and labor markets—certainly affect mothers' work-life balance (Damaske, 2011; Garey, 1999; Gerson, 1985; Walzer, 1997; Williams, 2012). Damaske (2011) shows how more privileged women tend to get higher-paying, more flexible, and more enjoyable jobs, all of which foster more steady employment (compared to less privileged women). She illustrates how women's work pathways vary by social class: "steady workers" (most commonly higher-earning women) maintain a strong commitment to paid work over time, and "pulled-back" workers leave the workforce or significantly reduce their employment after childbearing. "Interrupted" workers (most commonly low-earning women) had an unstable employment past and could not maintain steady work (Damaske, 2011). Moreover, Stone (2007) clearly

shows how inflexible workplaces (and the demands of family life, including the unrelenting demands of husbands' professional jobs) can push even the most qualified, educated women out of professional jobs. Drawing from these studies, I explore how the jobs of mothers and their partners influence mothers' accounts of work-life balance.

As detailed below, this research also includes a small sample of seven immigrant mothers; while this is not a large enough number to infer any patterns, particularly as these immigrants come from different countries of origin, this data can suggest potential areas of study for future research. Immigrants face particular disadvantages under Canadian social policies. While they were just as likely as non-immigrants to find jobs under work-first social assistance programs, their wage levels were significantly below those of non-immigrants, particularly when they received their education outside of Canada (Mitchell, Lightman, & Herd, 2007). Some of the root causes of these differences are "discrimination and the discounting of education and experience earned abroad" (Mitchell et al, 2007, p.304). Many immigrant women face other challenges in finding jobs, such as traditional gender ideologies from countries of origin that prioritize women's unpaid work as mothers and wives over their paid work. Past research suggests that traditional beliefs can compel immigrant women to stay at home with children (Moon, 2003; Read & Cohen, 2007). In addition, many immigrant women arrive in new countries without the extended family networks that contributed child care and household labor in their countries of origin, so are less able to engage in paid work (Man, 2001). Below I explore a small sample of immigrant mothers and their (very limited) experiences with paid leaves.

» Gender Arrangements and Gender Culture

While two-thirds of Canadian mothers work for pay (Almey, 2010), they still perform the lion share of child care and domestic work in most families. In 2010, women did twice as much unpaid child care as men (about 50 weekly hours compared to men's 24.4) and 13.8 hours of weekly domestic work compared to men's 8.3 hours (Milan, Keown, & Robles Urquijo, 2011). This discrepancy in domestic labor helps explain why mothers are more likely to take paid leave than fathers.

Predominant cultural beliefs undoubtedly influence mothers' accounts about caregiving and paid work (Arendell, 2000; Damaske, 2011; Hays, 1996). Hays (1996) identified the "intensive mothering" ideology, which holds that mothers should be primary caregivers of children and that ideal childrearing is guided by experts, time-intensive, and emotionally engrossing. Under intensive mothering, when mothers must work for pay, they justify their employment by stressing its benefits for their children (not for themselves). Research generally supports the predominance of an intensive mothering script in North America (Arendell, 2000), while also identifying important challenges to intensive mothering, particularly among employed mothers (Blair-Loy, 2003; Author, 2012) and mothers of color (Christopher, 2013; Collins, 2000; Damaske, 2011; Dean, Marsh, & Landry, 2013).

In her analysis of women's work-family decisions, Damaske (2011) argues that women use accounts to explain behaviors that are likely to be scrutinized by others: "accounts allow women to emphasize behavior they believe will be more socially acceptable, such as decisions made to care for family, and to minimize behavior that might be seen in a negative light, such as decisions made for

themselves” (p. 149). Below I explore how women in this sample use accounts of intensive mothering in their discussions of paid leaves—and how social class mediates these processes.

To this body of research, this article contributes a focus on mothers’ accounts of paid leaves and work-life balance, exploring the intersections of the policies women receive, their jobs (and those of their partners), and the predominant cultural scripts that emphasize intensive mothering. The paper also explores how mothers’ accounts vary by social class.

Methods

From 2007 to 2009 I conducted in-depth interviews with 59 mothers of young children—26 in two cities in Ontario, Canada and 33 in two U.S. cities. In this article I focus on the 26 Canadian mothers who lived in Toronto and Hamilton, a smaller, more industrial city in Ontario. Given the lack of a federal paid leave policy in the U.S., few U.S. mothers received any substantial paid leave, which meant their discussions of paid leaves were quite limited. For these reasons, I focus on Canadian mothers in this article.

I recruited Canadian respondents with flyers advertising the studies in public places in high-, middle-, and low-income areas, and by snowball sampling, through which personal contacts and other respondents gave me names of other mothers. I limited the number of contacts recruited by snowball sampling in order to ensure a diverse sample. Interviews were semi-structured. I worked from an interview guide, but gave mothers substantial leeway to discuss the experiences most important to them. I conducted interviews in either public places or in the respondents’ homes. Interviews lasted

between 45 minutes and two hours, most in the hour to 90 minute range.

I asked all mothers about their experiences of and opinions about paid leave (and any other social policies they had received). I also asked about mothers’ work experiences and caregiving arrangements, that of their partners (when present), as well as their preferences for paid and unpaid work and how these preferences have changed over time, particularly after having children. I did not consistently use the term “work-life balance” in interviews, because women in early interviews expressed confusion over what the term meant; here I operationalize “work-life balance” by how closely women’s actual work-life arrangements matched those they said they desired. Figure 1 describes mothers’ work-life balance as high, moderate, or low. However, mothers’ narratives show that work-life balance is indeed a fluid concept: some mothers had the work-life arrangements they preferred at the time of the interview, but worried they would not when children were older; others did not have their preferred work-life arrangements at the time of the interview but expected to soon. Therefore, these descriptions of work-life balance in Figure 1 are intended as general descriptions that may change over time, rather than fixed categories.

The sample consists of 26 mothers who had at least one child under age six. I gave all mothers pseudonyms. Only three of the women self-identified as women of color (Celeste, Cecilia, and Sitina). In this article I do not explore variations in mothers’ narratives by race. However, another paper from this study (Christopher, 2013) focuses on the racial/ethnic differences in mothers’ employment narratives. As seen in Figure 1, there is substantial variation in respondents’ social class background. The social class categories in Figure 1 reflect respondents’ family income

and education: upper-income mothers all had post-graduate degrees, and all had annual family incomes above \$175,000 (in Canadian dollars). The upper-middle class mothers had at least university degrees and family incomes between \$75,000 and \$174,999. (One exception is Betsy, whose income was lower than \$75,000; she had a Ph.D., so I considered her upper-middle class.) The lower-middle class mothers had family incomes between \$30,000 and \$74,999, and most did not complete university. None of the low-income mothers had a university degree from Canada, and all had annual family incomes under \$29,999. All but one of the mothers (Salma) were either married or cohabiting with a partner at the time of the interview, and all were heterosexual except Betsy, who had recently moved in with her female partner. Most respondents had two children; seven had one child; five had three children; and one had four children. These mothers had children slightly later than the average age of first birth in Canada (28.5 in 2011). Most mothers were in their 30s, one was 44, a few were in their 20s, and one was 19.

This sample is limited because it includes mostly partnered mothers; in 2010, about 24% of Canadian births were to unmarried mothers. Therefore, these mothers' narratives should include fewer hardships than a sample with more single mothers.

After student assistants transcribed tape-recorded interviews, I coded them first using literal coding based on the main questions of interest in the study (Hesse-Biber, 2007). I then moved on to more "focused coding" (Charmaz, 1995) in which I compared respondents' narratives to one another, and compared respondents' narratives to themes from the literatures on mothering, social policy, and work-life balance. Through focused coding I developed the themes on which this article is based.

Findings

» Ontario Mothers' Paid Leave Narratives

Fifteen of the 26 mothers (about 58%) received paid leaves for at least one of their children (and most received leaves for all children). However, as Evans (2007) suggests, higher-income mothers were much more likely to receive paid leaves: 82% of upper- and upper-middle income mothers received leaves, compared to 47% of low- and lower-middle income mothers.

Every mother in this sample—regardless of whether she received the paid leave herself—expressed support for the nearly year-long paid leave. The only criticism was that the policy should cover all mothers, including self-employed mothers and those who had not worked enough hours to qualify under the current policy. But few mothers leveled this criticism. Across the board, mothers praised the paid leave policy as "amazing," "a blessing," "wonderful," and "great." While the mothers were consistent in their strong support of "mat leave" (the lay term for paid leave), their experiences varied by social class.

» Paid Leaves among Upper and Upper-Middle Income Mothers

As seen in Figure 1, of the 11 upper- and upper-middle income mothers, all but two received paid leaves for their children, and all but two worked for pay or were on leave at the time of the interview. Most were steady workers and returned to work full-time after paid leaves (or planned to), but a few pulled back from work after having children.

Rachel was one of five upper-income mothers. She worked part-time as an attorney for the Canadian government, and with both children received paid leaves that were

Figure 1

Mothers' Social Class Background, Employment/Caregiving Status, and Work-life Balance (WLB)

Social Class	Employment / Caregiving Status	Received Any Paid Leave?	WLB
Upper Income			
Rachel	Attorney, Part-time	Yes	High
Leah	At Home	Yes	High
Sarah	Attorney, Full-time	Yes	High
Dana	Recruiter, Full-time	Yes	Moderate
Cara	Therapist, Part-time	No	High
Upper-middle Income			
Jessica	Consultant, On Leave, return Full-time	Yes	High
Melissa	Policy analyst, On Leave, return Full-time	Yes	Moderate
Serena	Writer, On Leave, return Part-time	Yes	High
Megan	Engineer, On Leave, return Full-time	Yes	High
Alissa	At Home	Yes	Moderate
Betsy	Adjunct Professor, Full-time	No	High
Lower-Middle Income			
Shanna	At Home	Yes	Moderate
Callie	Child Care Provider, Part-time	Yes	Moderate
Kathy	At Home	No	High
Harriet	At Home	Yes	Low
Salma	Cook, Part-time	No	High
Lisa	At Home	Yes	Low
Immigrant			
Carma (Burma)	Nurse, Full-time	Yes	High
Low Income			
Kelly	At Home, about to work Full-time	Yes	Moderate
Melody	At Home, Attending School	Yes	Moderate
Immigrants			
Azra (Palestine)	At Home	No	Moderate
Sitina (Sudan)	At Home	No	Moderate
Jasmin (Burma)	At Home	No	Moderate
Cecilia (Jamaica)	Cashier, Part-time	No	Moderate
Neema (Algeria)	At Home	No	Moderate
Ana (Brazil)	Personal Trainer, On Leave, return Part-time	No	High

“topped up” to 93% of her salary by her employer. After having her first child, she left the extremely long work hours in a private firm for her current job—which she “loved.” After having her daughter, she said that “working in private practice wouldn’t allow me to be the kind of parent I wanted to be.”

Describing her paid leaves and her part-time job, Rachel said:

I am so proud of my employers for offering these benefits.... I think I am the luckiest person to have this job. I really don’t think that I could have the life-work balance that

I do anywhere else. I feel tremendously supported by my employer as a working mother.

She went on to say that the “year leave is amazing.” She found the paid leaves “amazing” because they helped her be an involved mother, while also keeping a job she loves. She said, “I strongly identify as a lawyer. I also strongly identify as a mother, but I wouldn’t be happy staying at home. I enjoyed the year off that I had, but by the end I was itching to get back.” Rachel was content being an intensive mother when her children were infants but was ready to return to her job thereafter. When I asked if she felt any guilt about returning to work, she said no because she had “plenty” of time with her children given her part-time work schedule. Thus, the year-long paid leave bolstered Rachel’s “strong” identity as a mother, helped her maintain a steady worker status over time, and helped Rachel feel no guilt about returning to work (though the fact that she worked part-time also helped). The “amazing” year-long paid leave, then, served as “buffer zone” for any guilt Rachel would feel over working for pay with an infant at home.

Rachel’s husband earned a very high salary as a corporate attorney. With their high family income, Rachel hired a “wonderful” full-time nanny, a housecleaner, and a gardener. Ultimately Rachel’s strong commitment to her job, her part-time work schedule and her high-quality child care made her quite happy with work-life arrangements after her paid leaves ended.

Most of the other upper-income mothers remained steady workers after childbearing, though Cara pulled back to low part-time hours. All five of these mothers employed nannies and housecleaners, which helped the employed mothers remain committed to paid work (and lessened the household

labor of Leah, the one upper-income, stay-at-home mother).

All but one of the six upper-middle income Canadian mothers received paid leaves. A few of these mothers were on leave at the time of the interview, and all planned to return to work at the end of their leaves. However, there was also one “pulled-back” upper-middle income mother, Alissa, who at the time of the interview was staying at home with her three children, ages 14, eight, and two. After having her first child, she took only three months off and went back to teach elementary school full-time. After having her second child, she returned to teaching once this child was four (she had accrued enough work time to have the full leaves with both of her children). After the leave with her third child, Alissa stayed home. She drew from an intensive mothering narrative at the time of the interview, saying, “I really wanted to have those firsts: the first steps, the first walk, you know, taking them to school the first day. They’re only small once...so for me it was very important to say I raised my children. Not somebody else.” Thus, the paid leave afforded her a “buffer zone,” during which time she could be the hands-on mother she wanted to be.

However, she planned on going back to work full-time once her youngest son entered Junior Kindergarten (in about two years). Yet whether Alissa would regain her status as a full-time worker was in question, because her husband’s job as a steel worker was very difficult to plan around; he worked “12 hour shifts on a rotating schedule...with three days off, three days working nights, two days off, then two days working days.” Needless to say, it was hard to arrange child care around this schedule. Unlike the mothers from higher-income households, Alissa did not have money to pay additional caregivers or housecleaners.

Alissa said she was happy with her work-life arrangement at the time of the interview, though she was worried about achieving balance when she went back to work. She complained about the lack of child care assistance from the government, saying that she “didn’t think it was fair” that so many assistance programs were not available to her family because they earned too much. Alissa’s husband earned about \$95,000/year as a steelworker, which she said might seem like a lot, but amounted to less than one would expect with a family of five. She even said she did not want to receive the \$100/month UCCB, because it pushed her family into a higher tax bracket. She had called the government to see if she could decline the payment but found out she could not.

As described above, she foresaw substantial work-life conflict trying to return to full-time work given her husband’s difficult schedule. Alissa shows that while paid leaves can serve as “buffer zones” to help mothers balance work/family demands during the first year of a child’s life, mothers who prefer to spend several years at home—and with husbands who work long, unpredictable hours—may use the leaves as a springboard into longer leaves from the workforce. In addition, without subsidized child care for middle class families, Alissa may struggle to attain work-life balance when she returns to her teaching job. Alissa’s account shows how social policies, cultural demands, and husbands’ jobs can intersect to complicate work-life balance.

However, all of the other upper-middle income mothers were more work-identified and used leaves as temporary breaks from employment. At the time of the interview, Jessica was a government consultant on paid leave with her 10-month old. Describing her leave, she said she had “loved every minute” (though later in the interview admitted the

very beginning was hard due to “isolation” and “not getting out enough”).

Jessica was preparing to return to work full-time and had mixed feelings about putting her son in daycare. On one hand, she said she felt guilty about returning to work: “you know, he’s my baby, I should be taking care of him.” At the same time, she was “excited to go back” to work, because she was happy with the on-site daycare he would attend and looked forward to returning to her job: She said, “I like working. I like using my brain.... I like the culture of the company, and I like the work that I do. I feel like I’m making a difference.” While Jessica’s comments seem contradictory, one can see how she uses her year-long paid leave to account for her being a good, intensive mother (during which time she felt she “should be taking care of him”). Here again, the paid leave provided a year-long buffer zone in which Jessica could be an intensive mother and not feel guilt because she was at home.

As Jessica prepared to go back to her job, she resolved the dilemma between intensive mothering and full-time work by emphasizing that she had to work in order to help pay her family’s mortgage and bills; she said that not returning to work was “a non-reality.” She also planned to ask her boss if she could return to work for four days a week rather than five. When I asked if she thought this was possible, she described a few women who had arranged similar four-day schedules at her workplace, but also said the “culture of the workplace” generally did not support part-time work. At the time of the interview, it was unclear whether Jessica would achieve her ideal of working four days a week. How Jessica would manage the guilt associated with going back to work depended in part on whether she could work four days a week instead of five.

Melissa, an analyst for provincial social services on paid leave with her second child at the time of the interview, was one of the only mothers who said she would prefer to work for pay over spending the first year with her child. Nonetheless, she took six months of paid leave with both of her infants because she felt “it’s really important that kids, especially early on, get a lot of time with their parents.” Regarding her work-life preferences, she said: “Truthfully, I would love to be back at my job. (Laughs.) A lot of people ask me ‘do you love being at home with your kids?’ And the answer is not really. The more breaks, the better.” Thus, while Melissa did not have her desired work-life balance at the time of the interview, she would soon achieve her desired work-life balance by splitting her year-long paid leave with her partner (an architect). She was looking forward to going back to work, though she did worry that her long work days would mean a long time away from her young children. Melissa said her family could not afford a nanny, and she did not want to put her infant in a daycare, so she and her partner split the paid leave. While she adopted some aspects of intensive mothering, she also stressed that working provided her with important benefits. As shown above, said that her parenting improved when she had time *away* from her children. Melissa’s negotiation of social policies and cultural demands—splitting the paid leaves equally with her husband and posing clear challenges to the intensive mothering ideology—was unique among this sample of mothers. In her case, the six months of paid leave would provide a “buffer zone” for her to be the intensive mother she felt she should be; but she was also very much looking forward to returning to work thereafter.

Overall, several patterns emerge from the upper-middle and upper-income mothers’ paid leaves narratives. Paid leave serve as

“buffer zones” for mothers in terms of the cultural expectations of intensive mothering: several mothers used the paid leaves to justify their status as “good mothers,” while also staying committed to their careers as steady workers. The year-long paid leave also provides a buffer zone that assuages work-life conflict during the first year of a child’s life, and the mothers with more resources, more family-friendly employers, and more involved husbands had an easier time managing work-family conflict in the subsequent years of a child’s life. In the absence of these benefits, mothers (like Alissa, and possibly Jessica) would struggle to return to work, a pattern also seen in the narratives of many lower-middle and low-income women.

» Paid Leaves among Lower-Middle and Lower Income Mothers

As stated above, fewer than half of the lower-middle and low-income mothers received paid leaves. They were ineligible for a number of reasons: Cecilia was self-employed as a nanny, so she was not eligible. Salma, Ana, and Kathy did not work enough hours at work to qualify for leaves. Three immigrant mothers (Azra, Jasmin, and Nee-ma) had not worked at all since moving to Ontario; immigration interrupted their status as workers. All three of these immigrant women said they preferred to be at home with their young children. However, all also said they preferred to work at least part-time in the future, though none of them was certain that they would be allowed to work given their immigration status (and none had any specific plans in mind for child care). Compared to the upper- and upper-middle income mothers, more lower-earning mothers were staying at home with young children, a decision all but one of them (Lisa) said they preferred.

A common pattern for lower-middle income and low-income mothers was receiving paid leave and then pulling back from work; this describes six of the seven mothers who received leaves. For example, Harriet was one of the most conflicted mothers in the sample when it came to paid work:

I had planned to go back but I...when it came down to it, I just did not have the heart to go back. It was the toughest choice of my life, really...the agony over that decision, yeah...it affected my identity really, 'cause...the self-esteem of not going back and actually bringing in a paycheck...and I was kind of letting my employer down and we were a team...so I was letting down the team. But on the other hand I just didn't want to miss those first steps...and they [her children] needed to have somebody that was there constantly, their source of security.

As one can see in this quote, Harriet drew from an intensive mothering script. Later in the interview, when I asked whether she liked her job, she said, “off and on, but no, near the end I wasn't happy with it, because you couldn't turn down overtime without them throwing a fit...it was stressful there.” When explaining why she did not return to work, she added “the money wouldn't have been enough either, it'd be basically working for somebody else to raise my children. And with hardly any benefit.” Thus, for Harriet, there were multiple reasons for her not to return to work after her paid leave; as Damaske (2011) would suggest, her account stressed the needs of her children, the most culturally appropriate explanation for mothers' decisions to stay home. But Harriet also had a low-wage job that she did not enjoy, and her husband worked long hours. A year-long paid leave was simply not enough to assuage the work-family conflict brought on by all these factors, so Harriet stayed home

after the year-long “buffer zone” of her paid leave. One can clearly see the difficulty in Harriet's decision to stay at home—the “toughest choice” of her life. At the time of the interview, she said she would prefer to be working part-time, but did not see how she could arrange that given her husband's long work hours.

Only one immigrant mother, Carma, received any paid leave. Carma immigrated to a large city in Canada from Burma (also known as Myanmar) in 1998. Carma worked at a nursing home for 40 hours a week, and was also attending nursing school to attain her BSN, or four-year nursing degree. She had two daughters and hired a caregiver for them during her work hours. While Carma and her husband both worked full-time, their family income was modest—the four family members shared a one-bedroom apartment.

Carma spoke passionately about her nursing job, and about nursing school: she said, “For me, I spend so much effort and so much hard work in my nursing school, and that was my calling. That's my job. I love it; I love what I do.... I have all this skill, I don't want to lose it.” Carma invested a great deal in her education, and did not want to give up those skills to stay at home full-time with children. She also described the confidence and independence conferred by her job: “If my husband would say, ‘you stay at home,’ like traditionally back home, I would feel unfulfilled. I would feel unproductive.... I love to work and be productive.” Carma also talked about how being a mother made her more compassionate person, and a better nurse: “I feel rejuvenated [when] I come back from work. I'm energized because I love what I do.... I'm happy to see them [her children].” While Carma clearly valued motherhood and was glad she had paid leaves with her two children, she also

strongly valued her paid work and expressed no guilt about working for pay (and instead stressed the benefits of her children gaining independence from her).

With her first daughter, Carma split the paid leave with her husband, and with her second daughter, Carma took the full year of paid-leave. Like Rachel, Carma used the paid leaves as short-term strategies to be able to care for her infants, and she preferred to work full-time once they were older. She (somewhat jokingly) said, "I'm strong like an ox, I can take it!" Thus, Carma had achieved her ideal work-life balance during her paid leaves, and thereafter.

Carma's relationship with her husband (who worked full-time as a carpenter) was complex; he was one of only two fathers in this sample who split the paid leave with his wife. However, Carma said she had to push him to contribute housework and child care. While she seemed happy in the relationship and said he supported her work and schooling, she did not want to rely solely on him for income.

Carma stressed the importance of a strong work ethic more than any other mother in this sample. She said she inherited this work ethic from her mother, who taught her that "all the good things people have are their education, and...compassion, and you have to be productive." She also said her mother taught her "survival skills." When I asked whether most immigrant Burmese women in her city worked for pay, she said, "women are equally hard-working as their husbands...they're immigrants, and they have to work hard more, to prove to Canada that they are productive members of society."

Only one other immigrant woman (Cecilia, from Jamaica) worked for pay, and she too said she worked because she did not want to "depend on anybody" like her husband.

Because this is such a small sample size of immigrant women, in particular those who work outside of the home, we cannot draw any inferences from this similarity. However, Carma's case suggests that a strong desire to work might be more necessary for employment for immigrant mothers, particularly if they face barriers to work under immigration law or because of husbands' traditional attitudes.

Kelly's work-life arrangements provide an interesting contrast to those of Carma. Kelly had two children, age seven and two, at the time of the interview. She had not worked for pay since having her older child. She drew heavily from intensive mothering: "I've always thought that a mom should be at home with their children, and I love babies, I never had a problem with being home. It was just always the money that was the problem." Consequently, she was about to start a full-time job cleaning houses. She did not want to work for pay—certainly not full-time—but said she had no choice, because she and her long-term partner could no longer afford the rent on their townhouse.

Before having children, Kelly worked full-time as a supervisor of office cleaners, and she received paid leave after the birth of her child. After the leave ended, she did not want to return to work; she said, "I really wasn't comfortable sticking my new baby in a daycare that, you know, he didn't know. And I knew he would cry, which would probably make me cry, because I am an emotional person, and I just couldn't do it." After receiving social assistance for a short time period, she met her current partner, who supported her financially. They had a child a few years later.

Like Carma, Kelly was living in a relatively low-income household, could not afford to hire help for housework, and was frustrat-

ed that her partner did not contribute more housework and child care. Kelly hoped that starting full-time work would push him to help more around the house. However, unlike Carma, Kelly preferred not to work for pay when having young children, and Kelly was fine depending on her husband for financial support. She said, "I'm probably a little bit more old school, I'm comfortable with a man going to work, and me staying at home doing more of the home job, the mom job." Both Carma and Kelly used paid leaves with at least one of their children, but they used them in different ways: Carma used her paid leave as a brief time away from paid work, whereas Kelly used her paid leave as a segue into several years out of the work force (like Alissa). Kelly was more comfortable with traditional "gender arrangements," but Carma was not.

Kelly and Melody were the only low-income mothers who received any paid leave; Shanna, Callie, Kathy, and Cecilia also brought up fears about low-quality daycare. In contrast, Lisa wanted to work, but could not find a job. Given multiple bouts of unemployment, Lisa's work pathway was interrupted.

Overall, the lower-middle and lower-income mothers were less likely to receive paid leaves, and when they did, they often used paid leaves as segues into longer periods of staying at home with children. Many drew from intensive mothering, but as Harriet's narrative shows, some also had jobs that were not rewarding, and several expressed fear over putting their children in low-quality daycares. With the exception of Carma, many of these mothers expressed work-life preferences they could not attain: preferring to work part-time (Harriet), preferring not to work for pay (Kelly), or preferring to work for pay (Lisa). Most of the immigrant mothers were glad to be home with young

children, but expressed reservations about being able to work for pay when children were older, which all said they wanted to do. Thus, while paid leaves still served as "buffer zones" against work-life conflict (for those who received them), work-life balance was often harder to attain once leaves ended.

Conclusion

As Pfau-Effinger (2004) suggests, the "gender order" of welfare states and labor markets, "gender arrangements" in households, and the "gender culture" in societies all affect women's lived experiences. On one hand, the "gender order" of paid leaves benefits these Ontario mothers. The year-long paid leaves were "buffer zones" that helped higher-income mothers remain steady workers: paid leaves postponed work-family conflict for a year, and mothers were automatically "intensive mothers" during this time, which allowed them more freedom to focus on employment after paid leaves ended. As Damaske (2011) would suggest, many of these women framed their use of paid leaves by pointing to their families' (particularly their children's) needs. This study adds that the higher-income mothers were typically able to negotiate the "gender order" of paid leaves, their desires for steady employment, and the "gender culture" of intensive motherhood to attain their work-life preferences. Two mothers (Melissa and Carma) even posed direct challenges to an intensive mothering ideology. They split paid leaves with their partners, fostering a more egalitarian "gender arrangement" in their households, and attaining the work-life balance they desired.

However, attaining work-life balance was typically harder for lower-middle and low-income mothers, who were less likely

to receive paid leaves, wary of low-quality child care outside of the home, and generally more invested in intensive mothering. Lower-income mothers were less likely to receive the “buffer zones” of paid leaves. Among the few that did receive paid leaves, most did not return to their jobs after leaves ended. However, one lower-earning mother with a strong orientation to paid work (Carma) used leaves as temporary breaks from employment, similar to the higher-income mothers. Among the other lower-income mothers, living under a liberal welfare state providing paid leave but not child care left them with few options once leaves ended. Some of these women (like Harriet) would prefer to work, though many others did not; in any case, their employment options were constrained. Harriet’s narrative shows how unappealing and low-paying jobs can push mothers into stay-at-home motherhood. Harriet and Alissa’s narratives also show how husbands’ long work hours constrain married women’s employment. Thus, this sample of mothers suggests that in addition to class differences in access to paid leaves (Evans, 2007), other aspects of the “gender order” of the Ontario welfare state and labor market—the nature of mothers’ former jobs, the demands of their husbands’ jobs, and the ability to afford quality childcare—all influence mothers’ work-life balance. Mothers’ social class background mediated their employment options and their access to social policies, leaving mothers with different experiences of the “gender order.”

As Harriet’s comments suggest, mothers in lower-paying jobs also need better working conditions, which would provide greater incentives for them to return to paid work. The experiences of mothers in this sample suggest that until countries have policies that subsidize high-quality child care and improve the working conditions of low-in-

come jobs, mothers’ pathways from paid leave to employment will likely vary by social class.

This study raised important questions for further research on the work-life arrangements of immigrant women. Only one immigrant woman in this sample received any paid leave at all; the other immigrant mothers were not eligible for paid leaves to help them attain work-life balance. Carma’s narrative suggests an extremely strong work ethic may be necessary to overcome the structural factors impeding employment found in past research. In any case, more research is needed on immigrant women and their experience of policies and work-life balance.

These mothers’ experiences of work-life balance changed over time, and many mothers expressed different expectations for their employment in the near future. These mothers’ narratives confirm prior research claiming that work-life balance is fluid, not fixed. This study adds that the gender order, gender culture, and gender arrangements women live in—their access to social policies, their jobs and those of their partners, and their beliefs about motherhood—all influenced mothers’ work-life balance. This study also suggests that a complex intersection of structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors uniquely affected each mother’s experience of paid leaves and work-life balance; nonetheless, within income groups, common patterns emerged. ■

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