



Program on Gender, Work & Family

*"Reshaping the workplace
around the values people hold
in family life."*

LOW-INCOME WORKERS STRUGGLE TO BALANCE WORK AND FAMILY

Low-income workers are more likely to need workplace flexibility – and less likely to have it.

While high paying professional positions may offer workplace flexibility, lower-wage jobs usually have the most rigid schedules. And while some low-income workers may qualify for unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act, most cannot afford to take it. Without workplace flexibility or paid leave, low-income workers are forced to choose between caring for their families and their economic security.

Low-cost child care is less reliable. For families earning less than \$20,000 a year, child care costs often represent over 20 percent of a family's income. To avoid these costs, many low-income families rely on informal networks of child care such as leaving children with relatives and older siblings. These arrangements often fall apart at the last minute, leaving kids without care and parents without the job flexibility to care for them. Low-income parents are more than twice as likely to be absent from work because they need to care for a sick child or because their child care arrangements fall apart.

Low-income workers often achieve workplace flexibility by simply quitting; many others are fired.

Parents who struggle to balance work and family obligations risk losing their jobs – or having to quit them. One recent study found that low-income workers often will quit their jobs in cases of family emergency, simply because low-wage jobs offer few adequate reasons to stay. Workers who do not quit may get fired due to absenteeism and related reasons. The effect is to drive many families further into poverty.

Low-income workers would greatly benefit from:

- **Paid family and medical leave** so workers do not have to choose between caring for their families and their economic security
- **Parity for part-time workers** to ensure that those who work part-time avoid the hidden and unfair penalties of lower wages, lack of benefits, and limited opportunities for promotion
- **Unemployment insurance** for part-time workers, whose income is integral to low-income families

THE PROGRAM ON GENDER, WORK & FAMILY is a research and advocacy organization, based at American University, Washington College of Law, that seeks to restructure the workplace around the values held in family life. Please visit our website at <http://www.wcl.american.edu/gender/workfamily> for more information about the program.

¹ Elaine McCrate, "Working Mothers in a Double Bind" (Washington DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002).

² Linda Giannarelli and James Barsimantov, "Child Care Expenses of America's Families" (Urban Institute, December 2002).

³ Jody Heymann, Renee Boynton-Jarrett, Patricia Carter, James T. Bond, and Ellen Galinsky, "Work-Family Issues and Low-Income Families" (Ford Foundation 2002).

⁴ Lisa Dodson, Tiffany Manuel and Ellen Bravo, "Keeping Jobs and Raising Families in Low-Income America: It Just Doesn't Work," Report of the Across the Boundaries Project by the Radcliffe Public Policy Center and the 9to5 National Association of Working Women (Cambridge, MA: Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, 2002).