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By Kerry Daly and Linda Hawkins

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Fathers and the work-family politic

A variety of forces have combined to change men's role in the work-family equation. The fact is, more men are playing an active, positive role in the equation, prompting changes in culture and politics. The changes affect men, women and children, and these authors have suggestions for making the changes work.

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With little fanfare, a revolution is occurring in the workplace. While once men trudged off to work, unconflicted in their provider role, they are now reconciling a different set of pressures and constraints to accommodate increasingly complicated family responsibilities. These new pressures require continuously sorting through competing expectations for how men use their time. Although women have contended with work-family constraints for some time, men are catching up. But they are facing very different challenges. Work-family is framed as a women's issue with emerging supports and public dialogues; work-family for men is languishing as a largely private struggle with few supports and limited recognition that there is even a problem to address.

It is tempting to want to simply include men as

part of the discussion for women's work-family struggle. However, we argue that there are a number of reasons why we need to look differently at "working fathers" compared to working mothers, in the politics and discourses of workplaces and families, in the seldom discussed importance of fathers for child well-being, and through the important role of workplace culture in facilitating or hindering men's abilities to meet their families' needs for care.

The politics of care and men's invisibility

At the very core of the work-family issue is the politics of care. In a culture where two incomes are typically required in order to sustain family life, there is an inherent challenge associated with providing emotional and physical care to children, partners, aging parents - and often overlooked - one's own self. This is familiar territory for women. Motherhood has traditionally been, and in large part continues to be, associated with nurturance, emotional support and physical care. One need not look too far in our contemporary culture to see how this association continues to be reinforced by portrayals in advertising or messages in parenting magazines.

Cultural dominance of the mother's role in the provision of care to children leaves father's emerging role as carer somewhat invisible. A sole focus on women's experience blinds us to the type and depth of the emerging participation of men, rendering men's care not only less visible, but also less valuable. Many fathers now do hands-on carework formerly assigned to women in the family, including diaper changing, daycare drop off, and medical and school appointments. Father participation and

interest in involvement may indeed be changing faster than our ability to measure and report these changes - certainly father involvement is changing faster than our dated discourse on father providers and mother nurturers. In families where parents are separated, men often have difficulty for a variety of reasons maintaining long-term relations with their children, while the discourse often focuses on continued financial provision.

Primary responsibilities and the politics of choice

Most importantly, balancing work and family for women is also steeped in a (middle-class) discourse of *choice* which accompanied the wave of women into the workforce in the 70s and 80s. Work and family became an important political issue for women because they were *choosing* to work after decades of either being deliberately excluded from the paid labour force or simply told that their proper place was in the home. While most now recognize the disjuncture between women "choosing" to work and the necessity for most families for two incomes, the discourse of "choice" has never been applied to men.

By contrast, it is culturally assumed that men work and pay attention to their families (in that order). There has been continuity in this expectation of paid work for men, with the result being that it is women who have tended to experience more guilt, stress and conflict by virtue of *choosing* to add work to their family responsibilities. The assumption that men will work outside of the home is not questioned - we are still more likely to blame the mother when there are problems with the children and blame the father when there is insufficient food on the table.

Fathers as contributors to the work-family problem

Although there are indications that men are changing their care activities, the dominant emphasis has been on men's failure to carry out their fair share at home. Instead of doing their fair share, men are

perceived to add to women's burden of the double day. While men do more housework, direct childcare and eldercare than in the recent past, women still do most of the tasks and household management functions. Contextualized in the current work-family discourse, men's experience is simply reported as not yet catching up on the housework. Again, some of men's activities that are different than women's, such as short or longer term household maintenance, are not always revealed or valued as part of the equation. Nevertheless, the dominant impact of these cultural perceptions is that the work family issue is a problem for women, not men, and the role that men play in this is to compound the challenges women face in balancing their own work-family lives.

Work-life conflict in men's lives

Beyond this discourse, what is the state of work-family conflict for men? Is there even a conflict for men? Conditions outside of the workplace show men's status, roles and opportunities are rapidly changing. Men are more directly involved in the provision of care to their children. And while women have streamlined some of their household duties, men have increased their share. Again, although women still tend to do more, there are other dynamics now in play, such as men increasingly contending with what one father referred to as "managing the guilt" arising from too many demands, too little time and the multiple "to do" lists formerly only in women's domain.

The net result of these changes is that there is, at one level, a merging of work-family pressures for women and men. If contemporary families are compared with recent cohorts, we see decreases in gender role specialization in both work and family realms. As women and men move in opposite directions - women increasingly into the workplace, and men increasingly into the activities of the home - both are beginning to embrace greater responsibility in areas where prior generations practiced clear gender segregation. In the same way that the conditions of paid work were, and continue to be, a

political issue for women, the conditions under which men provide care outside the context of their working lives is emerging as a political issue. Workplace participation is now being affected as men strategize about how to uphold their loyalty to the employer, while needing to find ways to adjust to and accommodate shifting demands on the home frontier.

The value of father involvement

Many of the political debates about men providing care and doing their fair share of the household duties have focused either on what fathers have failed to do or what fathers should do in the name of fairness and equity. While men have a ways to go before their contributions to household tasks and care activities are equal to women's, we need a discussion that focusses less on men's deficiencies and more on the advantages and successes of their care work.

Research on the benefits of father involvement has exploded in the last 20 years and we are only beginning to appreciate the value of father's involvement in children's lives. There is a strong empirical literature that demonstrates that children of involved fathers exhibit higher cognitive competency, emotional well-being, social competency, and positive peer relationships. Not surprising to men who are active in the care of their children, high levels of father involvement is good for fathers themselves, characterized by more confidence, lower levels of psychological distress, and higher life satisfaction, and have better outcomes for the relationships in which they are embedded, including higher marital satisfaction, and more involvement in community roles. The consequences of non-involvement are also well documented- we know that children in heterosexual families where fathers are absent or disengaged (with the exception of situations in which the safety of women and/or children are jeopardized) are at higher risk for a number of negative economic, social, and developmental outcomes.

Father involvement is shaped by men's own characteristics and strengths, by the co-parenting dynamics within a variety of family structures, by the services and supports that are available in the community, by broader social rules, cultural practices and policies that result in direct and indirect impacts on fathers and families. Important to this discussion, levels of father involvement are critically affected by work culture and employment practices.

Community support for fathers

One sector has recognized and is responding to the needs of fathers. In various community service and public health organizations, new programming is being developed and delivered to teach skills and confidence to fathers. Excellent programs have been offered by Canadian organizations such as "Dadscan" and "Prospere." Programs such as "Focus on Fathers" are culturally relevant and delivered in multiple languages in small and large communities. Like many social service offerings, programs are not always well-funded or sustainable over the long term, but the creativity and quality is unquestioned in the offering of father and kid cooking classes, courses for gay dads on adoption, "doctor dad" information sessions on childhood safety and illness, and many other broad efforts to provide social support to fathers. And these efforts in practice and programming are being supported by new research, policy and outreach efforts by organizations such as "Father Direct" in the UK, "Dads and Daughters" in the US, and in Canada, the "Father Involvement Research Alliance."

What many of these agencies have learned is that if they want to be effective they cannot simply add Dads to programs designed for and by women. Nor are Dads necessarily comfortable in environments such as daycares from which they have traditionally been excluded or have excluded themselves. New designs, attention and leadership are needed to bring this vision to workplaces.

Care and workplace cultures

Many work organizations are steeped in a model of traditional male management. Even when women have successfully made their way into these positions, the model has remained somewhat the same: long hours and company loyalty with the necessity of being free from the primary responsibilities for care in the home. Within this model, conflict around the provision of care is minimized as it is assumed that either women or a paid caregiver will cover off the responsibilities in the home.

One of the legacies of this kind of workplace culture is the assumption that women are the primary caregivers. While employers no longer publicly justify paying women less as their income is only complimentary to their husbands or partners, similar logic is used in the quiet but persistent understanding that women, not men, are the ones who require flexibility. James Levine talks about this as a 3-way collusion that is self-perpetuating: men don't request flexibility because they perceive that it is not available to them; employers don't openly offer flexibility to men because they don't seem to ever demand it; and by default, women request the flexibility in the face of both an ongoing cultural pressure and workplace availability. This collusion comes not only from men and their managers as men experience pressure from co-workers as well.

For men, a number of forces in the workplace make it difficult to speak up for flexibility. It is manifest in the expectation that men take leaves only when they really have to (why isn't your partner doing this?), that men are at greater risk of compromising loyalty when they choose family over work, or that men use parental leaves as a way of increasing their leisure time. With these residues of traditional gender expectations actively playing out, we can understand why the workplace is not an environment that encourages men to confidently take advantage of any workplace strategies offered.

Is this changing? There is some evidence that more men are taking a portion of parental leave allowed by Canadian federal legislation (but still only about one in ten eligible men do so). But as men are likely to still make more money than women, family finances alone will dictate that women will take the majority of leave time. UK government research recommends the Nordic model, in which a portion of leave time is available only to fathers, higher wage replacement is offered, and information campaigns are undertaken to increase men's participation.

Like community agencies that need to tailor programs to their audience, practices in the workplace are most effective when individual needs and constraints can be taken into account. Learning to accommodate fathers in the workplace is the next step in supporting diversity. Several new developments in the area of workplace human rights may add new impetus to the necessity of meeting employee work-family needs - moving the discussion from one of advocating for workplace supports for fathers and families, to mandating them. In the UK, legislation places an emphasis on the employer's responsibility to accommodate family demands. Fathers and mothers of children under 6 or disabled children under 18 have a legal right to request flexible working arrangements from their employer, including options such as working in home offices, working part-time, flexible schedules, or compressed hours. Importantly, the onus is not on the employee to build the business case for this option. Employers have a legal duty to seriously consider such requests, and may only turn down the request on the basis of a business case. In Australia, a recent case from Australian Industrial Relations Commission which refused to allow a large oil company and its contractors to change the shift of oil-rig workers from 7 days on and off to 14 day shifts, ruling that keeping fathers away from their families for extended periods of time is "not in the public interest." "Fathers Direct" reports a comment by one Commissioner that "fathers are not simply content to be the person who takes the children to the odd

footy match and on an occasional camping trip."

Finally, in Canada, the Ontario Human Rights Commission has recently released a discussion paper on human rights and family status, indicating clearly that Canadian policy and case law is underdeveloped in this area. The Commission cites a lack of attention on workplace policies that can have a negative impact on families, or the responsibilities workplaces can have in accommodating individuals on the basis of family status. The paper specifically notes issues for fathers, indicating that, due to assumptions about their roles, they may not be appropriately dealt with by employers, using examples such as access to parental leave and questioning of work commitment.

In spite of the growing popular rhetoric that families are "egalitarian" and parents are interchangeable when they do their carework, it is still the case that there is an imbalance between the primary responsibilities that we attribute to women and men. Men and work-family conflict is an emerging workplace issue; for leaders in the area, it is about planning, managing and developing opportunities for supporting fathers and men as carers. Men are moving to meet expectations to attend to children's emotional and physical care needs, to continue to attend to family financial needs of providing necessities - now sharing, negotiating and re-negotiating those responsibilities with their partner or co-parents. As families are stretched to capacity even with fathers' participation, it is reasonable to assume that demands for change will now shift more strongly for workplace change. We need to have not only a more comprehensive discussion that includes men in work-family issues, but a more complex discussion that recognizes the role they are already quietly assuming.

What to do for fathers in the workplace:

- Ask Dads what would be helpful for them
- Father programs/groups at lunch and learns
- parental leave advertised and planned for with fathers within the workplace - as well as mothers
- communicate a general commitment/attitude shift so that fathers feel they can take advantage of what is already offered
- incorporate community relations, include some focus on father/child events organized by a male champion
- reduce employee stress, giving extra time off; assisting fathers and their families that work for you
- review and adapt policies to reflect the wide variety of family formations