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Female Labor Supply: Why Is the United States Falling Behind?[†]

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In 1990, US women had one of the highest labor force participation rates among Western, economically advanced nations. By 2010, however, women in most other economically advanced countries had surpassed those in the United States in their participation rates. Unlike the United States, most other economically advanced nations have enacted an array of policies designed to facilitate women's participation in the labor force, and such policies have on average expanded over the last 20 years relative to the United States. In this paper, we study the role of such policies in explaining the decline in US women's relative position in labor force participation internationally and discuss some possible unintended side effects of these policies, including a reliance on part-time employment for women and lower female representation in high-level positions.

I. The Facts: Women's Labor Force Outcomes and Work-Family Policies

Table 1 shows male and female labor force participation rates (LFPRs) for the United States and the average of 21 other OECD countries for 1990 and 2010 for 25–54-year-olds (to abstract from schooling and retirement decisions). In 1990, US women's LFPR of 74 percent was the sixth highest among the 22 countries. By 2010, US women's LFPR had risen slightly to 75.2 percent; however, on average, women in the other countries had dramatically raised their LFPR from 67.1 to 79.5 percent, surpassing the United States. As of 2010, US women ranked 17th of 22, a stunning reversal. Men's LFPRs declined, both in the United States and in other countries, over this period, and the decrease was somewhat larger for US men. While US men's ranking also fell, from 14th to 22nd, this represented only a small increase in the difference between the US rate and the non-US average. Table 1 thus shows that, between 1990 and 2010, the *gender gap* in LFPRs fell from 19.4 to 14.1 percentage points in the United States, but by much more in other countries, from 26.9 to 13 percentage points. Using 2007 as the endpoint (i.e., before the recent recession) leads to the same overall conclusion about the reversal in US women's relative position.

Table 1—Male and Female Labor Force Participation Rates, Individuals Age 25–54, 1990 and 2010

	Men		Women	
	1990	2010	1990	2010
United States	93.4	89.3	74.0	75.2
Non-US average	94.0	92.5	67.1	79.5
US rank of 22	14	22	6	17

Notes: Non-US countries include: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Japan, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Data for Austria are for 1994 and 2010; data for Switzerland are for 1991 and 2010.

Source: OECD (2012b).

Table 2 summarizes international differences in some key policies that we expect to influence especially women's labor supply, as well as in the incidence of part-time work (defined by the OECD as less than 30 hours per week). The table presents data for the United States and a non-US average based on 16 other countries for which we have data in both 1990 and 2010. A number of differences between the United States and the other countries are evident from the table.

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Table 2—Selected Labor Market Policies and Part-Time Work Incidence, US and Average of 16 Non-US OECD Countries

	1990		2010	
	US	Non-US average	US	Non-US average
Parental leave: weeks	0	37.2	12	57.3
Parental leave: replacement rate (including zeros)	0	26.5	0	38
Right to part-time work (1 = yes)	No	0	No	0.313
Equal treatment, part-time workers (1 = yes)	No	0.125	No	0.750
Public child care spending/GDP (×100)	0.0286	0.3469	0.1144	0.4653
Male part-time work incidence	0.028	0.031	0.039	0.051
Female part-time work incidence	0.147	0.258	0.131	0.260

Notes: Child care data are for 1990 and 2007. Non-US countries include: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Part-time work is defined as less than 30 hours per week.

Sources: Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (Gauthier 2011); OECD (2010a–b, 2012 a–c); NBER (2011).

First, most countries provide workers with an entitlement to parental leave as well as mandated pay during such periods. The US mandate of up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave dates to the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 (Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2010). However, entitlements in other countries generally predated the United States, were longer, usually paid, and expanded on average by more during the 1990–2010 period. Parental leave potentially has complex effects on labor supply (see, for example, Ruhm 1998 or Waldfogel 1998). On the one hand, it is an entitlement that one can only qualify for by having a job in the first place. And, by giving workers the right to their job back after taking the leave, the entitlement raises the job prospects of those who have left the labor force after the birth of a child. These effects suggest that parental leave would increase women's LFPRs.[1] On the other hand, parental leave mandates may encourage women to stay out of the labor force longer than they otherwise would. In addition, such mandates may raise the expected cost of employing women of childbearing age, thus potentially lowering their wages and possibly deterring employers from hiring them. Thus, parental leave has theoretically ambiguous effects on women's labor supply, although Ruhm (1998) finds a positive effect based on eight countries.

Second, between 1990 and 2010, five countries enacted laws giving workers the right to demand a change to a part-time work schedule without exception. Moreover, while in 1990 only two of the 16 non-US countries shown in Table 2 forbade discrimination against part-time workers, by 2010, 12 had such legislation. Workers in the United States did not have such protections. We expect these rights for part-time workers to increase the supply of workers, particularly women, to part-time jobs. Of course, to the extent that these laws raise the cost of employing part-time workers, they may reduce employers' incentives to offer part-time jobs and their demand for women workers more generally to the extent women are viewed as more likely to demand a change to a part-time schedule (where this is an option). Thus, the net effect of part-time worker protections on LFPRs is theoretically uncertain. Interestingly, Table 2 shows that part-time work among women is much more prevalent in other countries than in the United States, while differences among men are small.

Third, most countries have publicly provided child care services. Table 2 shows that these expanded by slightly more in other countries than in the United States between 1990 and 2007 (the most recent year available), going from about 0.35 percent of GDP in 1990 to 0.47 percent in 2007 for non-US countries on average, and from 0.03 to 0.11 percent in the United States.[2] We expect child care availability

[1] There is also a measurement issue in that individuals out on parental leave are counted as employed (with a job but not at work). Ruhm (1998) finds indirect evidence that such effects can account for between one-quarter and one-half of the positive impact of paid leave on women's employment-to-population ratios.

[2] Our measure of child care expenses includes only in-kind child care services but excludes preschool expenditures due to lack of OECD data on these before 1998. Moreover, the OECD reports zero expenditures for most years for the United States, and we instead used data from NBER (2011) for Head Start expenditures plus subsidies for child care expenditures aggregated for all states excluding the District of Columbia due to missing data.

Table 3—Selected Regression Results for Labor Force Participation, Age 25–54, 1990–2010

	Men	Women	Men − women	log ratio men/women
Parental leave: weeks	0.018** (0.008)	0.041 (0.050)	−0.023 (0.048)	−0.000 (0.001)
Parental leave: replacement rate	0.003 (0.003)	0.045 (0.032)	−0.043 (0.033)	−0.001 (0.001)
Right to part-time work	0.462 (0.369)	4.304** (1.989)	−3.842* (1.962)	−0.059* (0.033)
Equal treatment, part-time workers	0.406** (0.194)	2.281* (1.244)	−1.875 (1.211)	−0.039* (0.020)
Male unemployment rate	−0.021 (0.043)	0.194 (0.262)	−0.215 (0.240)	−0.002 (0.004)
F-test: all policy variables	$p=0.0018$	$p=0.0121$	$p=0.0359$	$p=0.0166$
F-test: parental leave policies	$p=0.0005$	$p=0.1205$	$p=0.2359$	$p=0.2237$
F-test: part-time policies	$p=0.0718$	$p=0.0099$	$p=0.0276$	$p=0.0165$
Observations	424	424	424	424
R^2	0.872	0.921	0.934	0.911

Note: Models include year and country dummies.
**Significant at the 5 percent level.
*Significant at the 10 percent level.

to raise women's LFPRs by reducing the cost of working outside the home.

II. Accounting for the US Relative Decline in Female Labor Force Participation

To study whether changing work-family policies have influenced the trends in Table 1, we performed linear regression analyses of women's LFPRs, men's LFPRs, the male-female difference in LFPRs, and the log of the male-female ratio in LFPRs. We used annual data by country for the 1990–2010 period. Key explanatory variables include the parental leave and part-time work policies shown in Table 2, as well as the male unemployment rate (to control for business cycle effects), and a full set of year and country dummy variables. Standard errors were clustered at the country level. In our longer paper (Blau and Kahn 2013), we also estimated models including public child care provision (data on which were available only through 2007). The decomposition results were very similar to those presented here.

Note that we do not include education levels or GDP per capita since these may be endogenous with respect to women's labor supply. Specifically, women's schooling levels in part reflect their labor force plans, and there is likely to be a mechanical effect of labor supply on GDP per capita. Moreover, while previous research (e.g., Goldin 1995) documented a U-shaped effect of economic development on female labor supply, our sample consists only of developed economies during a very recent period in history (1990–2010). Our estimates should be seen as reduced forms of the effect of the work-family policies.

The inclusion of country dummies controls for omitted factors that may be stable over our time period, possibly including religion and culture (unfortunately, our data could not support the inclusion of country trends). Moreover, OECD data indicate that the taxation unit in nearly all of the countries studied here did not change during the 1990–2010 period (most countries except the United States tax on an individual basis), implying that our control for country fixed effects can account for these intercountry differences (OECD, *Taxing Wages*, various issues). We acknowledge that an exogenous increase in women's labor supply could lead to demands for legislation increasing parental leave entitlements and part-time worker protections. Thus, while it is plausible that such policies could affect women's labor supply, the laws themselves may well be endogenous.

Table 3 presents the results of the analyses of the LFPRs of men and women, as well as of the gender differences and ratios. The parental leave and part-time policy variables all have positive effects on both men's and women's LFPRs and negative effects on the male-female difference and the log of the male/female ratio of LFPRs. The policy variables are highly significant as a group in all specifications. The results for men may indicate a true effect of these policies on male LFPRs or may be due to a correlation of the policies with general factors raising LFPRs in the economy. Of importance here, however, is that the coefficients are much larger for women than men, leading to the negative signs in the models estimating the male-female gap (or ratio) in LFPRs. The larger size of the female effects suggests that our policy variables do reflect, at least in part,

gender-related factors affecting labor supply rather than simply standing in for economy-wide work propensities common to both sexes.

To assess the importance of family-friendly policies in explaining international trends in women's LFPRs, note that if we assign the non-US average levels of the policy variables to the United States in 1990, US women's LFPR would have been 77 percent instead of its actual level of 74 percent. By 2010, with the expansion of these policies outside the United States, giving US women the other countries' average policy levels would have raised US women's LFPR to 82 percent compared to its actual value of 75.2 percent, a substantial 6.8 percentage point increase. With an 82 percent LFPR, US women would have ranked 11th among the 22 countries described in Table 1, compared to their actual ranking of 17th. The actual female LFPR grew 12.9 percentage points more slowly over the 1990–2010 period in the United States than in the 16 other countries for which we have data on all variables. However, with the non-US policy variables in both 1990 and 2010, it would have grown 9.1 percentage points more slowly. Therefore, the policy changes shown in Table 2 can account for 3.8 percentage points (29 percent) of the deterioration in US women's relative LFPR, a substantial effect. A similar exercise finds only very small effects for men.

III. Are US Women Really Falling Behind?

While work-family policies appear to raise women's LFPRs, it is plausible that the generous parental leave mandates and part-time entitlements in most countries outside the United States reduce women's representation in high-level jobs, which generally require full-time, full-year, career-long commitments. This may operate on the supply side, if long leaves encourage women to stretch their leave time longer than they otherwise would[3] and part-time protections encourage them to take part-time rather than full-time jobs. On the demand side, more generous leave policies and a higher incidence of part-time entitlements may lead employers to engage in statistical discrimination against women as a group, anticipating that women will take advantage of such opportunities.

Consistent with this reasoning, Table 2 showed that US women are far less likely to work part time than women in other countries. To further examine whether the package of policies in other OECD countries tends to increase part-time relative to full-time employment on net, we repeated the analyses in Table 3 using the employment-to-population ratio (EPOP) and the part-time employment-to-population ratio (PTEPOP) as dependent variables. We found that the non-US averages of the policy variables did contribute to a higher level of both employment and part-time employment for women, but with most of the employment effect accounted for by part-time jobs. For example, in 2010, giving US women the non-US levels of the policy variables would have raised their EPOP by 7.2 percentage points (from 69.3 to 76.5 percent) and their PTEMPOP by 4 percentage points (from 9.1 to 13.1 percentage points). Thus, while the policies discussed above raise women's employment, this increase is made up largely (55 percent) of part-time work.[4] Effects of the policies for men's EPOP and PTEMPOP were small. Although some women may prefer the relative flexibility of part-time work, they pay a penalty in reduced earnings and benefits (Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2010).

In addition to having a much higher incidence of full-time work than women in other countries, US women also tend to work in higher-level positions than those in most other countries. In our longer paper (Blau and Kahn 2013), we used microdata from the 1998 and 2009 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) to compare men's and women's incidence in high-level occupations to those in ten other OECD countries for which the ISSP had data in these two years (Australia, Austria, Denmark, France, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and

[3] This is not necessarily inconsistent with our finding of a positive effect on the labor force participation of women in the full 25–54 year age group, though our results do suggest that, on net, the policies increase labor force attachment. Also, as noted previously, individuals are counted as employed when out on leave.

[4] Effects of the policies on men's employment and part-time employment were small. Note that women's incidence of part-time jobs rose by only 2 percentage points in other countries relative to the United States in Table 2. This is the case because the policy expansion increased employment by about 7 percentage points on a base of 60–70 percent and our estimates apply to the *flow* of part-time jobs rather than the stock.

Switzerland). The occupations were Managers, Professionals, and "Male Professionals," which we define as Professionals minus preuniversity teachers and nurses, two historically female dominated occupations requiring high levels of education (Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2010). The data show that women and men in the United States were virtually equally likely to be managers in both 1998 and 2009. In contrast, in the other countries, women were about half as likely as men to be managers (roughly a 6 percentage point gap). Women were more likely than men to be professionals both in the United States and, on average, in the other countries. However, the female advantage was much larger in the United States than elsewhere. And US women were equally likely as men to be employed in Male Professions, while in the other countries, there was a 2.4–2.8 percentage point female shortfall (17–25 percent). Published data also show less occupational segregation by gender in the United States than in most other OECD countries (Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2010).

Consistent with the data on occupations, we have found in earlier work that women in the United States rank higher relative to the male wage distribution than is the case in other OECD countries (Blau and Kahn 1996). However, the gender wage gap tends to be larger in the United States than elsewhere (OECD 2010a). This is partly because wage setting is much more highly centralized in most other countries, with an emphasis in Continental Europe and Australia on union contracts that raise wages at the bottom of the distribution. We have found that such policies lower the gender wage gap in such countries relative to the United States, although they also appear to raise women's relative unemployment rates (Blau and Kahn 1996; Bertola, Blau, and Kahn 2007). In addition, by reducing wage differentials associated with higher-paying occupations or industries, centralized wage setting may reduce women's incentives to seek higher-level positions.

IV. Conclusions

Our analysis of women's labor force participation and family-friendly policies suggests that there may be a trade-off between some policies that make it easier for women to combine work and family and women's advancement at work. On the one hand, such policies likely facilitate the labor force entry of less career-oriented women (or of women who are at a stage in the life cycle when they would prefer to reduce labor market commitments). On the other hand, entitlements to long, paid parental leaves and part-time work may encourage women who would have otherwise had a stronger labor force commitment to take part-time jobs or lower-level positions. Moreover, on the employer side, such policies may lead employers to engage in statistical discrimination against women for jobs leading to higher-level positions, if employers cannot tell which women are likely to avail themselves of these options and which are not. Thus, while these policies may give women options that they would not otherwise have had, they may also leave them less likely to be considered for high-level positions. One's evaluation of such policies must take both of these effects into account.

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