



considering
the impact of
women's paid
and unpaid
work

by LISA M. LYNCH

comments on 'spinning the top'





ANCY FOLBRE HAS WRITTEN an interesting and provocative piece challenging the premise that reaching the top in the private sector represents the global maximum in career goals. Examining the biology of gender differences, she looks at whether being successful at work makes women

less desirable mates and whether evolution has resulted in men with a more competitive winner-take-all attitude, while women are more generous and cooperative. She also asks us to reconsider the role of competition within our economic system and argues that this requires an explicit accounting of unpaid work in the home when measuring gross domestic product (GDP) in national income accounts.

Measuring the contribution to GDP of unpaid work would certainly be worthwhile and might even prove useful in efforts to compare cross-national trends in macroeconomic productivity. In a recent paper, MIT economics professor Olivier Blanchard points out that while productivity is higher in the United States when measured by output per worker, it is higher in many European countries when measured by output per hour of work. He argues that Europeans have chosen to work harder but fewer hours. As a result, they consume more leisure. What he does not discuss is whether some of this “leisure” may actually be time spent in household work such as raising children. It would be interesting to examine investments in child rearing in more detail as this might have ramifications for future productivity trends. But it is extremely difficult to come up with good data on this front. Measuring the output produced by services that are bought and sold in the marketplace has been challenging; doing so for services without a market price would be no easy task.

I would like to raise three additional points relevant to the quantity and quality of women’s labor supply.

SKILLS, TRAINING, AND THE TIME SHORTAGE. Economists and policy makers have highlighted the degree to which wage inequality is driven by skill differences. Yet, working women who want to raise their wages by getting additional education and training face the extra burden of a time crunch. While some progress has been made in the division of labor in household tasks, women still bear a disproportionate share of household work (see page 30). This constrains women’s ability to invest in training programs that take place outside work hours and creates a vicious circle with respect to their career advancement prospects. Women are less likely to participate in employer-funded after-hours programs and thus less able to apply for new career opportunities. As a consequence, they may be viewed by senior management as less committed than their male colleagues.

further reading



“Measuring Organizational Capital in the New Economy,” by Sandra E. Black and Lisa M. Lynch, National Bureau of Economic Research Conference on Research in Income and Wealth, April 2002, www.nber.org/~confer/2002/crws02/lynch.pdf.

“Revisiting the Relationships among Gender, Marital Status, and Mental Health,” by Robin Simon, *American Journal of Sociology*, 2002.

“Opportunity Counts: Teams and the Effectiveness of Production Incentives,” by Brent Boning, Casey Ichniowski, and Kathryn Shaw, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 8306, May 2001.

IS THERE A WORK-FAMILY TRADEOFF? Sociologists such as Robin Simon have highlighted the fact that women who work are happier than women who don’t. However, Simon also finds that working men and women react to the pressures and stresses of balancing job and family very differently. Men are socialized to view working harder at their job as consistent with caring for their families and their role as good providers. However, women are more likely to think of work and family as a zero-sum game—time spent at work is time *not* at home caring for their families, leading to increased stress and depression. This may play an important role in the apparent decision to “opt out” of work by some professional women.

THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS. In our research, Sandra Black and I observed that as U.S. companies invested in new technology and adopted new forms of organizational design during the 1980s and 1990s, they also placed an increased premium on their employees’ “soft skills.” Other researchers, including Boning and colleagues, have reached similar findings. The ability to collaborate and work in teams, to be problem solvers, to be flexible, and to have good communication skills should favor women, since it plays to their socialization. This research also suggests that today’s workplace is characterized not simply by “winner-take-all” (or reward the “lone rangers”), but by an increasingly important role for cooperation and flexibility.

Implications for policy

So what should we do? With respect to government policy, we should acknowledge that discrimination still exists and that women’s work lives have been considerably improved by their ability to legally challenge discriminatory practices. In addition, it is important to continue to press government to use its economic might as a customer to promote change. Finally, the importance of early investment on children’s subsequent education, social, and employment outcomes is well established. Government policies that ensure that female (and male) workers have access to quality child care regardless of income will help more families to be effective as both parents and workers.

As for employers, they need to maintain their vigilance against discrimination—both the overt and subtle forms, as Barbara Reskin’s paper makes clear. This requires that they explicitly measure and reward antidiscriminatory efforts. In addition, employers should recognize that relying on employees to engage in voluntary training outside normal work hours may well mean disproportionately fewer women advancing within their organizations. They also need to recognize the increasing importance of developing and promoting team players, not just “lone rangers.”

And individuals need to lobby government and employers for workplace policies that support employee development and recognize men’s and women’s responsibilities outside the workplace. We should use our position as shareholders to urge firms to increase the proportion of women in top management and directors’ positions. Finally, we should be active as parents and community members in schools, where much of girls’ and boys’ socialization takes place. ✱

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