A Labor Market Punishing to Mothers

By DAVID LEONHARDT

The last three men nominated to the Supreme Court have all been married and, among them, have seven children. The last three women — Elena Kagan, Sonia Sotomayor and Harriet Miers (who withdrew) — have all been single and without children.

This little pattern makes the court a good symbol of the American job market. Women and men with similar qualifications — age, education, experience — are much more likely to be treated similarly today than in the past. The pay gap between them, while still not zero, has shrunk to just a few percentage points.

Yet once you look beyond the tidy comparisons of supposedly identical men and women, the picture is much less sunny. There are still only 15 Fortune 500 companies with a female chief executive. Men dominate the next rungs of management in most fields, too. Overall, full-time female workers make a whopping 23 percent less on average than full-time male workers.

What’s going on? Men and women are not identical, of course. Many more women take time off from work. Many more women work part time at some point in their careers. Many more women can’t get to work early or stay late.

And our economy exacts a terribly steep price for any time away from work — in both pay and promotions. People often cannot just pick up where they have left off. Entire career paths are closed off. The hit to earnings is permanent.

The fact that the job market has evolved in this way is no accident. It’s a result of policy choices. As Jane Waldfogel, a Columbia University professor who studies families and work, says,
“American feminists made a conscious choice to emphasize equal rights and equal opportunities, but not to talk about policies that would address family responsibilities.”

In many ways, the choice was shrewd. The feminist movement has been fabulously successful fighting for antidiscrimination laws that require men and women to be treated equally. These laws have not eliminated the blatant sexism of past decades — think “Mad Men” — but they have beaten back much of it.

As a result, outright sexism is no longer the main barrier to gender equality. The main barrier is the harsh price most workers pay for pursuing anything other than the old-fashioned career path.

“Women do almost as well as men today,” Ms. Waldfogel said, “as long as they don’t have children.”

The data make this case. So does the disproportionate number of prominent women who do not have children — Ms. Kagan, Ms. Sotomayor, Janet Napolitano and Condoleezza Rice, among others. Obviously, many other successful women (including Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg) have children. Through a combination of talent, hard work and good fortune, they have managed to beat the odds.

But that is indeed what they are doing: beating odds stacked against them. Most parents are simply not able to have it all, regardless of where they are on the income spectrum.

A recent study of business school graduates from the University of Chicago found that in the early years after graduating, men and women had “nearly identical labor incomes and weekly hours worked.” Men and women also paid a similar career price for taking off or working part time. Women, however, were vastly more likely to do so.

As a result, 15 years after graduation, the men were making about 75 percent more than the women. The study — done by Marianne Bertrand, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz — did find one subgroup of women whose careers resembled those of men: women who had no children and never took time off.
On the other end of the spectrum, low-income women generally do not have a choice between career and family. Many are single parents. Their chances of escaping poverty are hurt by the long-term costs of taking time off after childbirth and having little flexibility in their schedules.

Taking the next step toward workplace equality probably has to start with an acknowledgment that most parents can’t have it all — at least as long as part-time work, flexible schedules and long leaves do so much career damage.

A growing number of parents already seem to have come to this conclusion. That’s one reason for the rise in the number of mothers who have dropped out of the labor force. Lacking good part-time job options, more are choosing full-time parenting.

Last year, 40.2 percent of married women with children under 3 years old were outside the labor force, up from a low of 38.6 percent in 1998. The increase, according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics analysis, “occurred across all educational levels and, for most groups, by about the same magnitude.” By contrast, women without children at home have continued to join the work force in growing numbers.

Unfortunately, this problem isn’t one that lends itself to a sweeping policy solution.

There are steps that can help. Universal preschool programs — like the statewide one in Oklahoma — would make life easier for many working parents. Paid parental leave policies, like California’s modest version, would make a difference, too. With Australia’s recent passage of paid leave, the United States has become the only rich country without such a policy. (Giving parents here a full year of leave for each child would cost about $25 billion a year, or less than 0.2 percent of gross domestic product, Ms. Waldfogel says.)

Given fiscal realities, a more realistic immediate idea may be the recent British law giving workers the right to request a switch to a part-time or flexible schedule. Employers can still say no, but the establishment of a formal right seems to have made a difference. So far, about 90 percent of requests have been approved.

Yet policies like these are not enough. In the European countries with much more generous parental leave laws, women remain far behind men on career ladders.

The best hope for making progress against today’s gender inequality probably involves some
combination of legal and cultural changes, which happens to be the same combination that beat back the old sexism. We’ll have to get beyond the Mommy Wars and instead create rewarding career paths even for parents — fathers, too — who take months or years off. We’ll have to get more creative about part-time and flexible work, too.

If you want a preview, you can look at the few professions in which large numbers of highly skilled women have been able to force change. Obstetrics used to be a field that required doctors to be on duty at all hours. Today, group practices allow obstetricians to share the 3 a.m. deliveries and, in the process, have a life outside of work. Optometry and veterinary medicine have their own versions of this story.

With both government and corporate budgets tight, it’s easy to be pessimistic, but I think history argues for optimism. This country doesn’t always move quickly or evenly toward equality. Yet it does tend to move in one broad direction.

For almost 200 years, the Supreme Court did not have a single woman on its bench. Sometime later this week, it is likely to have three.

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