

**Care Work, Gender Inequality and the State:  
Women's Employment and Children with Disabilities**

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**Abstract**

Despite the deinstitutionalization of people with disabilities in the U.S.A., much of the care for children with disabilities is performed at home, where care work is largely women's work. Thus, the gender division of labor in the care for children with disabilities, in the absence of greater institutional or state support, is one mechanism for the reproduction of gender inequality more broadly. Using new data on disabilities from the 2000 Decennial Census, we test for an association between the presence of children with disabilities and the division of paid work between husbands and wives. The results are consistent with other evidence that when care work is to be done within families, it falls disproportionately to women -- undermining women's career mobility and contributing to gender inequality in the labor market as well as within families.

## **1. Introduction: Care work and gender inequality**

The deinstitutionalization of people with disabilities stands as one of the major civil rights achievements of the twentieth century in the United States. However, care for children with disabilities -- like other care work (Cancian and Oliker 2000; Folbre 2001) - continues to present problems for gender equality (Traustadottir 1991). The vast majority of children with disabilities attend regular schools as a result of intense pressure from disability advocates. Yet much of the care for children with disabilities is still performed at home (Marcenko and Meyers 1991), a center of gender inequality, where care work is largely still women's work. The disproportionate share of care work women perform at home restricts their access to the labor market and reinforces the devaluation of their work, contributing to gender inequality in general. Thus, gender division of labor in the care for children with disabilities may be one mechanism for the reproduction of gender inequality more broadly. This paper tests that hypothesis, using new data on disabilities from the 2000 Decennial Census.

## **2. Deinstitutionalization and the family**

In the past 30 years, people with disabilities have become a much more integral, visible part of their communities in the United States. This process was determined by a paradigmatic change in perceptions about disability, which triggered a reform of policies concerning the rights and the principles of care for people with disabilities. The reform emphasized and was built upon an increased role for the family in providing such care.

Before the Industrial Revolution, people with disabilities participated in the production process, in agriculture and small-scale industries. Industrialization however,

imposed strict discipline, deadlines and production norms, eliminating the flexible and individualized work environments that had permitted the integration of people with disabilities. At the same time, by drawing more people into the formal labor market, and into crowded living conditions, the industrial economy rendered families less able to provide for their members with disabilities at home. As a result, people with disabilities increasingly were committed to specialized institutions, where they were marginalized from the mainstream of social life (Oliver 1990).

The civil rights movement for people with disabilities made its appearance in the U.S. in the 1960s, following the Black civil rights movement with which it has been compared (Fleischer and Zames 2001). The movement by 1973 secured federal legislation patterned after the Civil Rights Act, and eventually led to the more comprehensive Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. The common thread through these developments was the integration of people with disabilities into community life. For children, that means growing up in their families of origin, having access to services that cater to their needs and being able to participate in classrooms with children who do not have disabilities. Further, schooling has become much more integrated, following the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act. In summary, one important result of the deinstitutionalization movement was the transfer of care work for children with disabilities from specialized institutions to local public schools -- and family homes.

### **3. Who cares for children with disabilities at home?**

A series of small, qualitative studies has found that women shoulder a disproportionate share of care work for children with disabilities, including Heller, Hsieh and Rowitz (1997), who use a sample of 113 families with mentally retarded children;

Cook (1988), who uses a sample of 36 families with young adults entering a psychiatric rehabilitation program; Marcenko and Meyers (1991), who use a sample of 89 families with developmentally disabled children; Lewis, Kagan and Heaton (2000), who use a sample of 32 families of children with disabilities; and Traustadottir (1991), who uses a small sample of in-depth interviews and participant observation in a support group.

Thus, women appear to take on the lion's share of care work for children with disabilities. Further, they do so in a context of inadequate institutional, community and family support (Lewis, Kagan and Heaton 2000; Marcenko and Meyers 1991). Therefore, one would expect to find that having a child with a disability affects labor force participation for women, and the limited evidence consistently supports that conclusion. Breslau et al. (1982), using a sample of 825 families, find that mothers of children with disabilities are less likely to be in the labor force, and the effect is stronger for children with more severe disabilities. Baldwin and Glendinning (1983), combining a small longitudinal study with a survey of about 1,100 families, find “overwhelmingly clear evidence that severe disability in a child is associated with marked differences in women’s participation rates, hours of work and earnings” (p. 60). More recently, Booth and Kelly (1998), using a sample of 305 families, show that mothers of "special needs" children are less likely to return to the labor market in the first year after birth, with 30% reporting that caring for their child is the reason for their decision -- results that are supported in a subsequent analysis (Booth and Kelly 1999).

However, we know of only one study on children with disabilities and women's labor force participation that uses a nationally representative sample: Porterfield's (2002) analysis of 1994 data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation. She finds

that young children with disabilities have much stronger negative effects on single and married women's labor force participation than young children without disabilities. The focus in our analysis is somewhat different, as we attempt to address gender inequality within married couples -- controlling for other factors that affect such inequality -- using new data from the 2000 Census

#### **4. Data and methods**

The 2000 Census included six new questions ascertaining the presence of disabilities, four of them appropriate for children: *sensory* disability, *physical* limitations, *mental* disability (learning, remembering or concentrating) and *self-care* disability (Adler et al 1999). In this preliminary analysis we employ the 1% Public Use Microdata Sample file; we will use the 5% file in a revised version. The Census Bureau excludes children under 5 years old from these measures; we analyze children with disabilities ages 5 to 15.<sup>1</sup> Because we have no prior knowledge of the level of care required for children with each of these kinds of disability, we analyze them separately as well as together.

Because we are interested in the effect of having a child with disabilities on the division of labor within married couples, we do not include foster or adopted children who have disabilities, because it is possible that parents knew of the disability when they brought the children into the home. In that case the causality between children's disability and parents' employment might be reversed.

We limit the analysis to married couple primary families in which both members are ages 25 to 64 and at least one member was employed in 1999, for a sample size of 416,241 couples. If the presence of a child with a disability is associated with a greater

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<sup>1</sup> We exclude disabled children ages 16 to 18 because the Census's "employment disability" question applies to those over age 15, and it is possible these older children are identified as having employment disabilities instead of the four childhood disabilities.

imbalance of market work in favor of husbands, or increases the odds that the wives were not employed at all in the previous year -- net of other factors affecting gender inequality -- that will be consistent with the hypothesis that the gender division of labor in the care for children with disabilities is a mechanism for the reproduction of gender inequality.

The first dependent variable in our models is the *division of market work* between husbands and wives, constructed as follows:

$$Y = (A-B) / (A+B)$$

Where Y is the division of market work, A is the wife's hours worked in the labor market in 1999 (the product of weeks worked and hours usually worked per week), and B is the husband's hours in the labor market. This variable takes on a value of 1 when the wife was the only one working, 0 when both worked the same amount, and -1 when only the husband was working.

The second dependent variable is a simple dummy variable indicating whether the wife was employed at all in 1999. Since the couples in our sample include at least one employed partner, those in which the wife was not employed include an employed husband.

We model these outcomes as a function of individual and couple characteristics. For children with disabilities, we test several measures. The first are dummy variables indicating the presence of a child with each of the disabilities listed above. We also test models with one variable indicating the presence of a child with any of the disabilities. In addition, to examine the effect of children requiring even higher levels of care, we include a variable indicating the presence of a child age 5 or older with a disability who

was not attending school at the time of the Census. We run separate models for each disability indicator.

In a second set of models, we limit the analysis to families that have a child with disabilities, and test for the effects of the number of children with disabilities, and the severity of their disabilities -- as indicated by the number of disabilities reported for the child with the most disabilities in the family.

Controls variables, all measured at the couple-level, include dummy variables for: *wife's education*, measured at four levels with less than high school as the reference category, and a dummy variable indicating couples in which the *husband has more education*; a series of mutually-exclusive race/ethnicity variables indicating couples in which both members are *Latino, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, or American Indian*; a variable indicating couple members are of *different race/ethnicity*; variables for *wife with disability* and *husband with disability*; the presence of a *child under age 5* and a *child age 5 or older*. Finally, we use continuous variables for *wife's age* and its square, and the *age difference* between husband and wife.

## **5. Preliminary Results**

Table 1 presents the prevalence of each kind of disability in married couple families, showing that 2.74% of all married couples (including those with no children) have at least one child with a disability, with mental disabilities being by far the most common. The table also shows that a small fraction of children with disabilities are not in school: only .07% of families have a child with a disability who does not attend school. Note that Porterfield's (2002) analysis of the SIPP data shows a much higher proportion of mothers with children having children with disabilities -- 15% -- presumably because

those interviews were conducted by trained interviewers, and included more questions about children's disabilities and care arrangements.

Table 2 shows means of the variables in the analysis, by whether couples have a child with disabilities in the household. Note these comparisons show the difference between those with children with disabilities and those without -- some of whom have non-disabled children and some of whom are childless. All differences in the table are statistically significant.

Table 3 shows the first regression results. The coefficients for the control variables are from models that do not include any disability variables. Additional models add each disability variable in turn, one at a time. Because of the small number of families with children with disabilities, the coefficients for the control variables are not affected by the addition of the disability variables.

Holding constant the control variables, the models show that the division of paid employment is more skewed toward husbands when there are children with disabilities in the household. For the continuous measure of division of employment hours, the effect is only significant with the (apparently) more care-intensive physical and self-care disabilities. For the odds of wives having no employment in the previous year, however, the effect is significant for all disability variables. In both cases, the effects are stronger for more serious disabilities, with the strongest effects seen when there are children with disabilities in the household not attending school.

Table 4 shows the results of the second set of regressions, which are limited to those families in which there is at least one child with a disability. The two variables of interest here are one that indicates the number of children with disabilities, and one that

indicates the greatest number of disabilities any child in the household is reported to have. Just fewer than 9% of families that have a child with disabilities have more than one, for an average of 1.13 per household (Table 2). However, it does not appear to be the number of children, but rather the number of disabilities reported for the most disabled child, that affects relative employment within married couples. Where children are reported to have multiple disabilities, wives contribute a smaller share of employment hours, and are even more likely to be out of the labor force entirely than their husbands.

## **6. Preliminary Conclusions**

These results suggest several conclusions about gender inequality and the relationship between families, schools, and the former institutions for people with disabilities. Clearly, deinstitutionalization has not resulted in the transfer of all caring work from institutions to families -- the vast majority of children with any disability are reported to be attending school. However, it is equally clear -- from previous research as well as from these results -- that a significant amount of care work remains for families with children with disabilities. And these results are consistent with the overwhelming evidence that when care work is to be done within families, it falls disproportionately to women -- undermining women's career mobility and contributing to gender inequality in the labor market as well as within families.

However, if children with disabilities were not able to attend school, these results imply the consequences for gender inequality would be even more severe -- more women staying out of the labor market or working fewer hours, and therefore earning smaller proportions of family income and reducing their economic options beyond the family. To alleviate this problem, then, requires either the redistribution of care work between men

and women within families, or the introduction of additional institutional supports to help care for children with disabilities. History suggests that the prospects may be better for the second alternative.

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**Table 1. Percentage of Married Couples with Childred with Disabilities, by Disability Type**

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	<u>Percent</u>
Any disability	2.74
Mental	2.18
Sensory	.51
Physical	.48
Self-care	.44
Child with disability not in school	.07
<i>N</i>	416,241

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**Table 2. Means of Variables Used in the Analysis, by Presence of a Child with Disability**

	No child with disability	Child with disability	Difference <sup>1</sup>
<i>Employment</i>			
Division of market work	-.283	-.364	-.082
Wife not employed	.223	.269	.047
Total hours employed	3,445	3,259	-186
Wife's hours	1,330	1,135	-194
<i>Age</i>			
Wife's age	42.43	37.67	-4.76
Wife's age squared	1,891.8	1,456.6	-435.2
Age difference	2.15	2.41	.27
<i>Education</i>			
Wife H.S. graduate	.292	.300	.009
Wife some college	.319	.348	.029
Wife B.A. degree	.184	.125	-.058
Wife M.A. or higher	.092	.060	-.032
Husband has more education	.347	.336	-.012
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
Hispanic	.075	.102	.027
Black	.060	.068	.008
Asian/Pacific Islander	.032	.018	-.014
American Indian	.003	.005	.002
Couple of difference race/ethnicity	.012	.014	.003
<i>Adult disability</i>			
Wife with disability	.133	.219	.086
Husband with disability	.165	.239	.074
<i>Own children</i>			
Number of children under age 5	.262	.275	.013
C.Number of children age 5 or older	.847	2.193	1.347
<i>Children with disabilities</i>			
Child with disability not in school	--	.027	--
Number children with disabilities	--	1.132	--
Child with mental disability	--	.893	--
Child with physical disability	--	.185	--
Child with sensory disability	--	.198	--
Child with self-care disability	--	.176	--
<i>N</i>	404,846	11,395	

1. All differences significant at  $p < .05$  level

**Table 3. Regression Results for Couple Division of Market Work and Wife not Employed**

<i>Variable</i>	<u>Division of Market Work</u> <i>OLS coefficient</i>	<u>Wife not Employed</u> <i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	-.480	--
<i>Age</i>		
Wife's age	.012	.905
Wife's age squared	.000	1.002
Age difference	.005	1.007
<i>Education</i>		
Wife less than H.S. graduate	--	--
Wife H.S. graduate	.078	.615
Wife some college	.121	.426
Wife B.A. degree	.102	.422
Wife M.A. or higher	.177	.252
Husband has more education	-.106	1.389
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
White	--	--
Hispanic	-.028	1.332
Black	.154	.656
Asian/Pacific Islander	.006 <sup>a</sup>	1.420
American Indian	.144	.818
Couple of difference race/ethnicity	.026	1.133
<i>Adult disability</i>		
Wife with disability	-.134	1.639
Husband with disability	.206	.794
<i>Own children</i>		
Number of children under age 5	-.156	2.100
Number of children age 5 or older	-.062	1.249
<i>Children with disabilities</i> <sup>1</sup>		
Chi Any child with disability	-.008 <sup>a</sup>	1.093
Child with mental disability	-.006 <sup>a</sup>	1.078
Child with sensory disability	-.009 <sup>a</sup>	1.189
Child with physical disability	-.049	1.353
Child with self-care disability	-.062	1.462
Child with disability not in school	-.096	1.684

<sup>a</sup> Not significant. All other variables significant at  $p < .001$ .

<sup>1</sup> Child disability variables were added one at a time in separate models. Coefficients on the control variables were not affect before the third decimal place; baseline coefficients shown.

*Note:* R-square is .0865 in all OLS models

**Table 4. Regression Results for Couple Division of Market Work and Wife not Employed, Where Couple Has at Least One Child with a Disability**

<i>Variable</i>	<u>Division of Market Work</u> <i>OLS coefficient</i>	<u>Wife not Employed</u> <i>Odds Ratio</i>
Intercept	-.232	--
<i>Age</i>		
Wife's age	-.001	.978
Wife's age squared	.000	1.001
Age difference	.004 ***	1.000
<i>Education</i>		
Wife less than H.S. graduate	--	--
Wife H.S. graduate	.050 **	.646 ***
Wife some college	.099 ***	.447 ***
Wife B.A. degree	.049 *	.485 ***
Wife M.A. or higher	.158 ***	.226 ***
Husband has more education	-.110 ***	1.339 ***
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
White	--	--
Hispanic	-.052 **	1.359 ***
Black	.209 ***	.562 ***
Asian/Pacific Islander	.111 **	.848
American Indian	.292 ***	.514
Couple of difference race/ethnicity	.053	1.030
<i>Adult disability</i>		
Wife with disability	-.125 ***	1.663 ***
Husband with disability	.210 ***	.796 ***
<i>Own children in the household</i>		
Number of children under age 5	-.107 ***	1.743 ***
<i>Chi</i> Number of children age 5 or older	-.031 ***	1.145 ***
<i>Children with disabilities</i>		
Number children with disabilities	-.004	1.003
Number of disabilities for child with most	-.054 ***	1.362 ***

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .