

“HAVING IT ALL”:
A COMPARISON OF WOMEN’S ATTITUDES TOWARDS BALANCING PROFESSIONAL
AND FAMILY LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES AND FRANCE

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine how certain cultural and political practices affect the simultaneous participation of women in the labor force and family life. Gains made from the feminist movement have allowed women more opportunities than ever to be active members of society, both politically and professionally. With this change, women must learn how to integrate these modern opportunities with the traditional roles of wife and mother. To better understand women's attitudes regarding work-life balance, this thesis will compare the trends of two major powers: the United States and France. This analysis will utilize the drastically different practices of both nations to identify if certain cultural practices better support women in their plight to "have it all" – a fulfilling personal and professional life. To do so, this thesis will first use statistical analysis of women's census data in the U.S. and France to understand underlying attitudes of female citizens. Next, it will explore family benefits offered in each nation and how they affect the personal and professional lives of women. Finally, it will include a comparative analysis of major national trends, making a point to identify important differences and their effects alongside cross-cultural commonalities between the United States and France.

Résumé

Le but de cette thèse est d'examiner comment certaines pratiques culturelles et politiques affectent la participation simultanée des femmes dans la population active et la vie familiale. Les gains réalisés surtout à partir du mouvement féministe ont fourni aux femmes plus de possibilités que jamais de participer aux domaines politique et professionnel. Les femmes ont donc dû apprendre à intégrer ces possibilités modernes avec les rôles traditionnels d'épouse et de mère. Pour mieux comprendre les attitudes féminines en ce qui concerne la conciliation entre le travail et la famille, cette thèse comparera les tendances de deux grandes puissances : les États-Unis et la France. Cette analyse se penchera sur les pratiques radicalement différentes des deux pays pour identifier si certaines pratiques culturelles permettent aux femmes de mieux soutenir leur revendication de « tout avoir » - une vie à la fois personnelle et professionnelle. Dans cet objectif, cette thèse utilisera d'abord l'analyse statistique des données du recensement concernant les femmes pour comprendre les attitudes sous-jacentes sur le sujet. Elle explorera ensuite les prestations familiales qui sont offertes dans chaque pays et la manière dont elles affectent la vie personnelle et professionnelle des femmes. En dernier lieu, elle comprendra une analyse comparative des grandes tendances nationales pour identifier les différences importantes et leurs impacts ainsi que les points communs interculturels entre les États-Unis et la France.

I. Introduction

The responsibilities and contributions of women in society have long been contested throughout the course of history. Traditionally, women have been defined by their physiological capability to bear children and their historical role as wife and mother. Long bound by expectations of domesticity and societal oppression, women are still often associated with caretaking and family responsibilities more so than their professionally minded male counterparts. However, gains in women's civil liberties and the wide support of the global feminist movement have created a new role for women to fill: the role of working professional. Today, women are seen taking the professional world by storm – women account for the majority of university students, women are entering the labor force at a higher rate than men, and there are more female executives than ever seen before. While the political and professional success of women acts as a testament to the power of feminine capability, this newfound progress precipitates new challenges. Among the biggest challenges is the ability to find balance between professional and family life in the face of new opportunities, melding the traditional domestic roles of the past with current workforce demands.

This thesis seeks to explore how certain cultural and political practices affect the simultaneous participation of women in the labor force and family life. In order to do so, it will analyze the trends of two major powers: the United States and France. With starkly contrasting practices towards professional women and family benefits, the comparison of these two nations aims to identify if certain cultural

attitudes or practices support more balance between professional and family life. Furthermore, this analysis seeks to determine if certain practices have a more positive effect on women's participation in the labor force. To do so, this thesis will be organized into three categories of analysis. First, it will look at statistical trends of women's census data in the U.S. and France in an effort to understand underlying attitudes of female citizens in each country. Next, it will explore family benefits offered and how they affect women in their efforts to care for their families while maintaining their professional lives. Finally, it will conclude with a discussion of major national trends, making a point to identify important differences and their effects alongside cross-cultural commonalities between the United States and France.

II. Statistical Analysis

Looking into the lives of professional women in the United States and France, the first indications of trends and attitudes lay in overarching population data. Census data collected in each of the countries provide an objective glance into how the female populations choose to lead their lives. Information is provided on marriage rates, birth rates, education, and participation in the labor force, which when combined paints a picture that the observer may use to compare French and American culture. This statistical comparison is used as the first step in building a foundation to understand cultural attitudes and practices of women in each specific country from which more qualitative conclusions can be drawn.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In the United States of America, census data collected by the federal government and analyzed based on demographics reveal telling trends about American women and their choices in both personal and professional domains. For the purposes of this thesis, the data has been segmented into two core areas: (1) mothers and family life and (2) women and the labor force.

A. Mothers and Family Life

At the end of 2014, the US Census reported that 43.5 million women between the ages of 15 and 50 have children¹. When compared to the 162 million women

¹ United States Census Bureau. "Mothers Day." *census.gov*. 06 May 2015. Web. 13 Jan. 2016.

residing in the US, this composes 26.85 percent of the female population and just under 60 percent of women within the aforementioned age range². Amongst these women between the ages 15 and 50, the number of children born to each woman varies greatly; the greatest proportion had no children at 42.4 percent, with the next largest group being women with two children at 22.3 percent. Following these numbers, 17 percent of women had one child, 11.7 percent had three, and 6.8 percent had four or more. Census data also showed a steep drop in motherhood after the age of 40: the percent of women between the ages of 44 and 50 who were childless did not differ from the percent of women between the ages of 40 and 44 who were childless. This information indicates that from a macroeconomic standpoint, those women who are childless at age 40 are likely to remain so, despite potential opportunity to still give birth.

Looking at American women and motherhood, the demographic composition of mothers and family status is quite diverse. In the last 12 months, approximately 64 percent of women age 15 to 50 who gave birth were married, while 36 percent of women were unmarried. The number of unmarried mothers continues to grow alongside the increase of unmarried women in the United States. In 2015, 55 percent of unmarried women age 18 and older were never married, an increase from 47 percent in 1990. Currently, there are 6.8 marriages per 1,000 people, a rate that proves to be significantly lower than those of the past. With this decreased

² United States Census Bureau. "Census Bureau Releases Updated Tables on Fertility." *census.gov*. 07 Apr 2015. Web. 13 Jan. 2016.

marriage rate comes an increase in unmarried couples with children – approximately 39 percent of opposite-sex unmarried couples have a child under 18. Lastly, the proportion of mother-only families has decreased in recent years, particularly among young mothers under 20 years old. This demographic composes only 2% of all family groups, a 50 percent decrease from 4 percent in 2000. However, there are still 9.9 million single mothers in the United States, with 6 of 10 single-mother families living at or below the poverty line.

In the United States, those women who choose to have children pursue a wide range of different childcare options. In 2013, there was a reported 862,043 paid child daycare employees within the continental U.S. alongside 693,325 unpaid employees. These services include daycare, preschool, personal nannies, and volunteer childcare services. In addition to professional and external resources, a vast number of women and families dedicate personal, internal resources to their childrearing. Currently, there are 5.2 million stay-at-home mothers in the United States. This number composes 24 percent of married family groups who have children under the age of 15³. 1 percent of families within this same demographic have a stay-at-home father, the highest proportion ever seen.

This demographic data demonstrates great diversity amongst American mothers, with some overarching trends. The majority of women between the ages of 15 and 55 are mothers; however, there is no dominant trend concerning number of children born to each woman. While the average number of children is two per

³ United States Census Bureau. "Wives' Earnings Make Gains Relative to Husbands', Census Bureau Reports." *census.gov*. 23 Nov 2015. Web. 13 Jan. 2016.

mother, this statistic is greatly affected by huge differences in family types and structures. Another factor greatly affected by family structure is the decision to work or stay-at-home. The majority of mothers are married, and the demographic of married women show the highest proportion of stay-at-home mothers than any other family group. While this choice may be easier to married women to make based on the availability of spousal support and higher income security from a spouse, it suggests an interesting insight into the potential preferences of American mothers as a whole. To really understand how mothers view work-life balance, it is imperative to further analyze how women participate in the labor force.

B. Women and the Labor Force

Census data shows that 57 percent of American women age 16 and higher participate in the labor force, compared with 69.2 percent of men of the same age range⁴. With this participation, women account for 46.8 percent of the labor force in the United States. While participation in the labor force is considerable, distribution among part-time and full-time female workers reveals differences in work patterns between men and women. Among those women who are active in the labor force, 74.6 percent work full-time while 25.4 percent work part-time. This statistic shows an interesting disparity in the ratio of full-time and part-time female workers compared to their male counterparts, 87.3% of whom work full-time and only 12.7% of whom work part-time. In fact, women compose only 41.6 percent of full

⁴ United States Department of Labor. "Women's Bureau: Latest Annual Data" *dol.gov*. n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2016.

time workers, yet account for 66.1% of part-time workers in the United States. Most female part-time workers are between 25 and 54 years old at 48.9 percent, followed by women above 55 years at 24.6 percent, between 20 and 24 years at 16 percent, and between 16 and 19 years at 10.5 percent. Data collected by the US Department of Labor reports that approximately 80 percent of those women who work part-time do so for non-economic reasons, which are defined as reasons other than the need for supplementary income. The most commonly reported reasons for women to work part time include childcare, family or personal obligations, school or training, retirement or social security limits on earnings, etc. Looking at these trends, data suggests a compelling finding on American women: a full time professional career is not necessarily conducive to a well-developed personal life.

Moving forward from women in the workforce, it is important to consider the role of mothers specifically. The US Census Bureau reports that 61.7% of women age 16 to 50 who gave birth within the past year were members of the labor force. While this composes a majority of new mothers, there is an obvious disparity between women in different professional brackets and educational levels. Women between the ages of 40 and 50 who held more managerial or professional careers “were more likely to be childless than women of similar age in other occupations.” Following this trend, there was only a reported 6.4 births per 1,000 women who held a graduate level or professional degree. The number of births spiked at lower educational levels – 30.3 percent of women who gave birth within the last year held a bachelor’s degree, while 85.2 percent had a high school diploma. This data further suggests a

potential barrier to motherhood amongst professional women in the US, and vice versa.

In a recent publication by *Bloomberg*, researchers state that the U.S. is far behind other advanced countries in the number of women active in the labor force⁵. The U.S. has been falling behind rapidly over the past few decades; amongst 22 nations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development rated on female participation in the labor force, the United States slipped from 6th place in 1990 to 18th place in 2012. The article cites that the US has gone from being “one of the leaders in female labor force participation among the developed countries to the situation where we have one of the lower.” What makes this ranking even more striking is that this downward trend in female labor force participation is contrary to the growing number of women pursuing higher education. Today, women earn 57 percent of bachelor’s degrees, composing a clear majority over their male counterparts⁶. And yet, despite this increase in education and nearly 50 percent composition of the labor force, the number of workingwomen deciding to stay at home with their children, both full-time and part-time, is on the rise. According to *The Economist*, there is no one, specific demographic of women who meet the “stay-at-home mom” mold:

Taken as a whole, the group includes mothers at both ends of the social scale... Some are highly educated bankers’ wives who choose not to work

⁵ Kasia Klimasinska and Sandrine Rastello, "Moms in 'Survival Mode' as U.S. Trails World on Benefits", *Bloomberg.com*. Bloomberg, 15 Jan. 2014. Web. 04 Jan. 2016.

⁶ "The Return of the Stay-at-home Mother", *The Economist*, 19 Apr. 2014. Web. 03 Jan. 2016.

because they don't need the money and would rather spend their time hot-housing their toddlers so that they may one day get into Harvard. Others are poorer but calculate that, after paying for child care, the money they make sweeping floors or serving burgers does not justify the time away from their little ones.

Looking at this increase in stay-at-home mothers, the proportion of part-time female workers in the United States gains legitimacy. The possibility of part-time work allows the closest thing possible to a compromise – labor force participation alongside the possibility to be an involved mother.

FRANCE

Much like the information collected on the United States, census data provided by the French government shows compelling trends in the professional and personal lives of women. Some of these trends show a stark contrast to those found in the US, while others demonstrate more common, cross-cultural trends.

A. Mothers and Family Life

Census data listed in the *Tableau de l'économie française 2015* reported 8 million families in France with a child less than 18 years of age⁷. There was 820,000 births in the year of 2014, providing France with a 12.4% birth rate, the second highest in the European Union. Compared to the United States, France has a lower average number of children per family: the largest proportion of French families

⁷ "Tableaux De L'économie Française - Édition 2015", *Insee. Institut National de la Statistique et des études économiques*, p. 30-34.

only have one child at 45.2 percent, the following largest groups being families with two children at 38.3 percent, three children at 12.8 percent, and four or more children at only 3.7 percent. These statistics compose an average of about 2 children per women. The age of mothers in France is also different than the US, showing a trend towards having children later in life. The average age for a first pregnancy in France is 30.3 years old, with 14 percent of births to women under 25 years, 64 percent to women between 25 and 34 years, and 22 percent to women over 35 years.

Much like their American counterparts, French women have a diverse demographic composition for family practices and motherhood. In 2014, 18.3 percent of all families with children belonged to single mothers, leaving only 3.3 percent to single fathers and 78.4 percent to couples. Of individuals over 15 years of age, 39.4 percent are single and 45.1 percent are married. There is an approximate one-to-one ratio between couples with and without children: couples with children compose 26.5 percent of the population while couples without children compose 25.9 percent. In France, couples also have the unique opportunity to participate in a *Pacs*, otherwise known as a civil union. More and more heterosexual couples are deciding to pursue this route instead of traditional marriage, with an annual increase in 8,400 civil unions each year. While a large number of women find family structure within a marriage, civil union, or single motherhood, still 20.5 percent of women over the age of 15 remain single and childless.

B. Women and the Labor Force

Census data reports that 67% of French women between the ages of 15 and 64 participate in the labor market. With this participation, women compose 47.8% of the labor force, similar to the ratio of their American counterparts. While the macroeconomic composition of female participation in France echoes the same general patterns as the United States, there is one notable difference: the participation rate of mothers. In France, the female group with the lowest participation rate is single women, with only a 34.7 percent. Of this small percentage, 78.3 percent work full-time and 21.7 percent work part-time, following the expected trend of higher full-time participation among women without family obligations. The next lowest participation rate was amongst single mothers, at 59.5 percent. Of these women, 70.6 percent work full-time and 29.4 percent work part-time. The most notable trend in female labor force participation was amongst mothers in couples who demonstrated the highest level of participation at 67.3 percent, nearly eight percent more than single mothers and 32 percent more than single women. Amongst mothers in couples, 65.2 percent work full-time while 38.8% work part-time, thus demonstrating a higher rate of part-time employment just like mothers in the United States. However, the high participation rate amongst mothers, particularly mothers in couples, hints at a significant cultural difference from that of the US.

While, unlike the United States, France sees a higher labor force participation rate from mothers, the country shares the same disparity between fertility rates and women with professional degrees. As seen in the United States and other developed

nations, fertility rate decreases as educational level increases among women⁸. The highest fertility rate is amongst women with no educational qualifications. These women, on average, give birth to 2.5 children. Women with lower secondary education have a fertility rate of 2.0 children/woman, followed by upper secondary at 1.8 and, lastly, women with higher education at 1.7.

⁸ Emma Davie et Magali Mazuy, “ Fécondité et niveau d'études des femmes en France à partir des enquêtes annuelles de recensement ”, *Population* 3/2010 (vol. 65), p. 475-511.

III. Benefits

When looking at female labor force participation rates and family practices, it is important to consider the cultural norms and political restrictions that women face in both the United States and France. While both countries share commonalities, cultural and political differences between the two, particularly in the case of family benefits, are staggering. On one end of the spectrum, the United States leaves much of its family benefits up to the discretion of each industry and individual business, following its standard of “hands-off” government involvement. On the other end of the spectrum, France demonstrates a highly regulated and standardized view towards family politics, allowing it to be a continuation of the country’s more socialized political system. With such apparent differences present between the United States and France, deeper analysis is required to see how the female citizens of each country are being most affected.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In the United States, family-related policies are handled by two separate entities: federal policies and business-specific discretion. Federal policies provide a baseline for what business are required to give their employees in terms of paid time off, maternity leave, medical leave, and other family-related benefits. While these policies provide a blanket of security amongst mothers and families, the majority of benefits are subject to the discretion of the business and industry in which a woman works. While these practices ensure the democratic and capitalistic

integrity of business, they also lead to a shocking disparity amongst women and the benefits they receive across all industries.

A. Federal Policies

Federal policies in the United States provide the infrastructure on which all family-related benefits are built. While the US is far from an integrated, socialized approach, the policies that are currently in place allow for a baseline standard for what is deemed acceptable for women and their families. The conditions mapped out by federal acts and initiatives determine how women are able – or unable – to create a balance between their professional and family lives. In the US, the most important federal policies concerning women and their families are the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, Temporary Aid for Needy Families, Medicaid, and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program.

Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993⁹

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) is the broadest, most all-encompassing federal policy related to professional women and family benefits. The FMLA, which applies to women of all income levels, educational levels, and family situations, outlines the conditions for employees to take job-protected leave for family and medical reasons. The United States Department of Labor provides the following summary of the FMLA and its specifications:

⁹ United States Department of Labor. “Family and Medical Leave Act.” *dol.gov*. Web. 13 Jan. 2016.

The FMLA entitles eligible employees of covered employers (at companies of more than 50 employees) to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons with continuation of group health insurance coverage under the same terms and conditions as if the employee had not taken leave. Eligible employees are entitled to:

- Twelve workweeks of leave in a 12-month period for:
 - the birth of a child and to care for the newborn child within one year of birth;
 - the placement with the employee of a child for adoption or foster care and to care for the newly placed child within one year of placement;
 - to care for the employee’s spouse, child, or parent who has a serious health condition;
 - a serious health condition that makes the employee unable to perform the essential functions of his or her job;
 - any qualifying exigency arising out of the fact that the employee’s spouse, son, daughter, or parent is a covered military member on “covered active duty;” **or**
- Twenty-six workweeks of leave during a single 12-month period to care for a covered service member with a serious injury or illness if the eligible employee is the service member’s spouse, son, daughter, parent, or next of kin (military caregiver leave).

Looking at the aforementioned specifications, the most important aspects of this federal policy relate to the assurance of a job after specified leave. While many employers find themselves at a disadvantage with the absence of an employee, this act underlines a crucial point: family obligations take priority over professional ones. The FMLA allows women the ability to dedicate time to their children and families without the threat of losing their jobs, thereby creating an assurance that promotes the balance between work life and family life.

While widely considered an asset to the professional women, the FMLA is not without its shortcomings. One critical issue with the act is the fact that it only guarantees “unpaid, job-protected leave.” For many women, the promise of a job after leave is not enough to justify taking the recommended time off for family-related matters, such as giving childbirth or tending to a sick family member. Without the necessary supplemental income, many women have their hands tied as to how much time they can take off without finding themselves at a financial disadvantage. Furthermore, the scope of this act is limited only to those companies with over 50 employees, putting women who work at smaller businesses at a disadvantage. In considering these limitations, it becomes clear that the FMLA does not allow for all women to put family above work, but rather those who work in a large enough company and who can afford to take unpaid leave. This bias leaves those women in the lower economic spectrum at a distinct disadvantage, not allowing them the same allowances as their more economically fortunate counterparts.

Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF)¹⁰

While certain programs inherently favor wealthier, professional women, there are many federal programs in place within the US that aim to support mothers at the lower end of the economic spectrum. Temporary Aid for Needy Families is one of the most notable policies of this nature, aimed at helping poor families reach self-sufficiency. With TANF, states are given block grants that are allocated to family-support programs that fall within one of the four outlines purposes of the program:

1. Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared for in their own homes
2. Reduce the dependency of needy parents by promoting job preparation, work and marriage
3. Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies
4. Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

In order to accomplish the listed purposes, TANF gives money to needy families each month for as long as two years. In order to receive these grants, families have to meet outlines work requirements determined by the state from which they are receiving the aid. With these conditions, TANF accomplishes two goals: protecting families at lower economic levels and providing incentive for workforce participation. These accomplishments are particularly relevant to single mothers. Currently, there are 9.9 million single mothers in the United States, and 6 of 10

¹⁰ United States Department of Health and Human Services. "About TANF." *acf.hhs.gov*. 29 Oct. 2015. Web. 04 Jan. 2016.

children living only with their mother are at or below the poverty level. With available aid for families in tough financial situations as well as work requirements, TANF provides single mothers the necessary support to raise their families combined with incentives to participate in the labor force, thus promoting a sense of work-life balance.

Medicaid¹¹

Following alongside TANF's support of single mothers below the poverty line, Medicaid also offers support for women and their families in tough financial situations. While Medicaid is a more comprehensive federal program available to all individuals below a certain income level, it has specific benefits for women and children that provide help for women and families in need. Currently, Medicaid finances 40 percent of births in the United States. This fact alone is proof of Medicaid's immense influence on the lives of women and their families. Beyond simply providing medical care to women giving birth, the program also provides prenatal care throughout the pregnancy as well as 60 days of postpartum care. Medicaid also aids women in supporting their children's medical needs. Medicaid partners with the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to provide health coverage to over 43 million children in the US and allows comprehensive services known as Early, Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT). In terms of its women and children specific policies, Medicaid greatly adds to the federal

¹¹ Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "Medicaid." *medicaid.gov*. Web. 04 Jan. 2016.

government's support of families, providing women with the help they need to create a safe, healthy environment for their children.

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program¹²

The last notable federal policy that provides support to women and their families is the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program, which helps women below the poverty line afford food for their families. This woman-specific program continues the federal trend of aiding mothers, particularly single mothers, who are economically disadvantaged. In order to be eligible for WIC, a woman needs to be pregnant, breastfeeding, or non-breastfeeding postpartum and below the poverty line. WIC gives federal grants to states that then distribute supplemental foods, healthcare referrals, and nutrition education to the women covered by the program. These resources are also given to infants and children up to five years old who the State determines to be at nutritional risk. The significance of WIC on the lives of women and families is very similar to that of Medicaid and TANF: it allows women to care for their families when they find themselves unable to do so on their own, thus providing federal support and promotion of family health and well-being.

Looking at the details of the WIC Program alongside Medicaid, TANF, and the FMLA, it is clear that there are overarching trends in how U.S. policies view aid towards women and mothers. Generally speaking, all the aforementioned policies demonstrate a bias towards economically challenged women. Most of these

¹² United States Department of Agriculture. "Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)." *fns.usda.gov*. Web. 05 Jan. 2016.

programs, with the exception of the FMLA, are means-based and aim to help mothers at or below the poverty line who lack resources to support their families on their own. Moreover, these programs show a distinct lack of universal treatment. There is no baseline standard for family benefits provided by the federal government, thereby leaving the majority of mothers without socialized support.

B. Business Trends and Practices

In addition to the parameters set by certain federal policies, women's balance between professional and family life is greatly shaped by the discretion of the businesses and industries in which they work. These decisions include a wide range of benefits, most importantly paid time off and childcare. The way a specific business chooses to structure its benefits packages to women, specifically working mothers, is the single biggest factor affecting a woman's ability to create favorable balance between her professional life and family obligations. Without certain benefits, a woman will be forced to choose between her career and family, thus affecting the decisions she makes towards the professional and personal opportunities she decides to pursue.

Paid Family Leave

One of the biggest and most sought-after benefits for employees, particularly women, is the opportunity for paid family leave. Paid family leave allows women to paid time off in the event of a family event, such as the birth of a child, family illness, or family obligation, with the guarantee to return back to work. Paid family leave is

crucial for many women, since it allows them the flexibility to accommodate their professional and family obligations without the threat of losing their job or their stream of income which they use to support themselves and their families. The importance of this benefit often drives women to certain industries or professions, thereby creating an invisible barrier to the professional choices women can make.

A current publication from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that only 12 percent of all workers in the United States receive paid family leave¹³. Due to the nature of industry in the US, there are clear trends that demonstrate the tendency of certain industries to offer this benefit over others, thereby putting women within those fields at a noticeable advantage. Based on the reported data, there is a clear trend towards more paid family leave for women who practice more professional occupations. The professions with the highest rates of paid family leave are management, business, and finance at 24 percent, nursing at 23 percent, and teaching and education at 18 percent. By contrast, the professions with the lowest rate of paid family leave are transportation at six percent, construction, extraction, fishing, farming, and forestry at seven percent, office and administrative support at eight percent, and protective service at eight percent. Seeing the industries with the highest and lowest rates of paid family leave, it is not surprising that there is also a clear increase in paid time off with an increase in wage. Of the workers within the lowest 10% of reported incomes, only four percent received paid family leave. This disparity between benefits at different income levels becomes more apparent when

¹³ United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Labor Benefits 2015." *bls.gov*. p. 53-60. Web. 10 Jan. 2016.

compared to the paid family leave rate of the highest ten percent of workers, 22 percent of whom receive the benefit.

Childcare Benefits

While paid time off is a clear consideration, many women find childcare benefits to be an even more important factor when choosing a career. In the United States, childcare benefits are awarded at the discretion of the employer, thereby creating a disparity of benefits received between different careers and industries. Childcare benefits ensure the ongoing support of a woman and her family throughout her professional life beyond major emergencies or life events. The ability of a woman to allow her child to be cared for on a continuous basis allows greater flexibility to that woman, both in her career and family life. For many women, the availability of childcare can eliminate the choice between staying at home and going back to work, allowing a compromise that promotes work-life balance.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that only ten percent of all workers receive childcare benefits, an even smaller percentage than those workers who receive paid family leave. Of these workers, there is once again a disparity between certain industries and the childcare rate of availability. The professional institutions with the highest rates of childcare benefits are hospitals at 27 percent and junior colleges and universities at 26 percent. Following this trend, 23 percent of registered nurses receive childcare benefits, the highest rate seen amongst all professions. While business was not listed amongst one of the highest-

ranking industries for childcare benefits, 19 percent of workers within management, business, or financial positions do receive some kind of childcare option from their employers. By contrast, the industries with the lowest availability of childcare benefits are goods-producing industries, with only seven percent of workers receiving some kind of aid. Only three percent of workers in construction, extraction, farming, fishing, and forestry are awarded childcare benefits alongside three percent in transportation and material moving and four percent in sales jobs. Once again, there is a clear increase in benefits with an increase in earned income – only six percent of workers in the lowest ten percent of earners receive these benefits, compared to 18 percent of workers in the highest ten percent. These statistics, alongside other data regarding family benefits, show a noticeable trend towards a polarized system of benefits in the United States. The significance of these findings will be further analyzed later in this thesis, accompanied by a comparison of notably different trends in the French system.

FRANCE

Unlike the United States, France has a comprehensive, socialized system to address the needs of French women and their families. Commonly known as *la politique familiale*, or family benefits, this system outlines universal benefits for all French families and the conditions on which a family receives them¹⁴. *La politique familiale* has two main objectives:

¹⁴ William F. Edmiston and Annie Duménil, *La France contemporaine*, Fifth ed., Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2014, p. 140-156. Print.

1. To compensate the financial cost of raising children
2. To have a demographic impact on the population of France

While the objectives are broad, the benefits included within the French system accommodate very specific situations and are tailored to the needs of each family. Family benefits are “awarded for legitimate, illegitimate, adopted and foster children on the condition that they are dependents of the beneficiary” and are “calculated as a percentage of [a] monthly family benefit base (BMAF)”¹⁵. Under the comprehensive benefits of family policy are three core areas: *prestations générales d’entretien* (basic benefits for maintenance), *prestations liées à la naissance et à l’accueil de la petite enfance* (birth and early childcare benefits), and *prestations à affectation spéciale* (benefits for special purposes).

A. Prestations générales d’entretien (Basic Benefits for Maintenance)

Prestations générales d’entretien are benefits under *la politique familiale* that all French families receive for having children. The objective of this benefit is to provide continued support and baseline coverage for all French women, children, and families, thereby promoting demographic growth. Within the basic benefits package, there is a sliding scale of additional benefits received as families increase in size. Additionally, there are more benefits available based on means-tested need, thereby creating a baseline of support that fills the gap between those women and

¹⁵ Centre des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale. “Les prestations familiales.” *cleiss.fr*. Web. 04 Jan. 2016.

families who can support their children on their own earnings and those who cannot.

L'allocation familiale (the child benefit) is the first benefit included within basic benefits for maintenance, and is awarded to all French families that meet the criteria. *L'allocation familiale* is paid “from the second dependent child residing in France” and includes a monthly stipend to the individual or family that provides for the children. *L'allocation familiale* is paid through the first twenty years of a child’s life, after which the benefit is reduced under the assumption that a twenty-year-old child will no longer be as dependent as they were in earlier years. There is no employment criterion for the *l'allocation familiale*, which allows for a sense of security amongst women and families. This child benefit will be paid out regardless of personal income; therefore all French families are protected against the threats of job insecurity or economic downturns that could compel an individual business to cut employees or benefits. While there are no employment criteria, the benefit is means-tested based on the needs of each specific family. Increases in the monthly stipends are dependent on the number of children belonging to the beneficiary: two-child households receive 130.12€ per month, three-child households receive 296.83€, and households with more than three children receive 166.72€ added to their stipend for each additional child¹⁶. While this benefit is paid out to all families with two or more children, the rates listed above may be subject to change based on

¹⁶ Centre des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale. “Les prestations familiales du 1er avril 2016 au 31 mars 2017 avant la retenue opérée au titre de la CRDS (0,5%).” *cleiss.fr*. Web. 04 Jan. 2016.

household income. The *Centre des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale* outline the following requirements for *l'allocation familiale* :

As of July 1, 2015, family benefits for households or people with dependent children are income-adjusted. The listed amounts apply to families whose annual income for year N-2 does not exceed 67,408 € (for a family with 2 children), 73,025 € (for a family with 3 children), 78,642 € (for a family with 4 children) + 5,617 € per additional child (for a family with more than 4 children). Family benefits for families whose annual income exceeds these amounts are divided by 2 or 4 depending on their income bracket. However, a supplement can be paid on a sliding scale if household income for calendar year N-2 is slightly higher than the applicable income ceiling.

Looking at the criterion to receive *l'allocation familiale* , it is clear that those individuals or households with lower incomes receive a higher benefit. However, this stipulation does not exclude higher income families from receiving aid. By adjusting *l'allocation familiale* based on income while still allowing it to be universally distributed, France closes the gap between households on both ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, creating a baseline of support for families and children.

In addition to *l'allocation familiale* , the *Centre des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale* cites that France also provides *l'allocation forfaitaire* (a flat-rate allowance) to families with three or more children “whose child benefit is reduced when one of the children reaches the age of 20... and is not earning more than 898.83€ in monthly income.” *L'allocation forfaitaire* aims to

supply further support to larger families on the assumption that households with more children carry a greater financial burden and a larger commitment for childcare, particularly when a child continues to be dependent after 20 years of age. *L'allocation forfaitaire* is “paid on behalf of the [20 year old] child for a period of 12 months, beginning on the first day of the month of the child’s 20th birthday up to the month preceding their 21st birthday.” The specific allowance rate is 82.19€ per month, and is once again able to be adjusted based on family income.

The third benefit included in the basic benefits for maintenance is le *complément familial* (the family income supplement), a benefit that looks to further supplement those families with insufficient income to provide for their children. The *le complément familial* is a means-tested benefit available to families with a minimum of three children between the ages of three and 21 years old. It is based on an income ceiling based on the number of dependent children within a household and the family composition. In order to receive this benefit, the *Centre des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale* stipulates that the net household income cannot exceed “€37,705 for a single-income couple with 3 children, or €46,125 for a dual-income couple or single parent.” If an individual or family qualifies for this benefit, the supplement amounts to 202.05€.

Lastly, the basic benefits for maintenance include *l'allocation de soutien familial* (the family support allowance), defined as “a non means-tested allowance payable for any dependent child under the age of 20 who is orphaned or half-orphaned, any child not regarded as a legitimate child of either parent, or any child whose mother and/or father fail(s) to provide adequate support.” This benefit goes

beyond the responsibilities of parents to account for the care of children itself. Non-means tested, *l'allocation de soutien familial* grants dependent children 127.96€ in the event of being orphaned by both parents or in a comparable situation and 95.99€ to half-orphaned children.

Les prestations générales d'entretien arguably compose the most important group of benefits for mothers in France. These benefits are offered on a universal basis, with opportunities for lower-income families to receive additional support based on need. These benefits are present throughout a child's life, allowing continuing support throughout almost all phases of parenthood. Furthermore, *les prestations générales d'entretien* provide an excellent foundation for further benefits, allowing the French system of *la politique familiale* to expand into more specialized areas.

B. Prestations liées à la naissance et à l'accueil de la petite enfance (Birth and Early Childcare Benefits)

Beyond *les prestations générales d'entretien*, *la politique familiale* provides further universal benefits to women and families. Another area of support includes benefits to offset maternity, birth, and early childcare costs, known in France as *la prestation d'accueil du jeune enfant* (PAJE). These benefits include both means-tested and not means-tested components, creating a comprehensive coverage of all women in the French system. *Prestations liées à la naissance et à l'accueil de la petite enfance* (Birth and early childcare benefits) aim to support women throughout one

of the most expensive periods of childrearing, thereby encouraging family growth despite personal wealth or circumstance.

The first benefit included to support new mothers and families is *la prime à la naissance ou à l'adoption* (birth/adoption grant), a means-tested allowance paid out to qualifying mothers at the time of birth or adoption of a child. *La prime à la naissance ou à l'adoption* looks to “cover the expenses related to the birth or adoption of a child,” therefore providing a layer of support beyond what is covered under other social programs, such as healthcare benefits. The allowance is granted based on an income ceiling, with earnings not to exceed €35,872 for a family expecting one child or €45,575 for families with two working parents or one single parent. While these rates provide a baseline, the ceiling is subject to change based on number of children already born within the family and number of babies expected. In addition to *la prime à la naissance ou à l'adoption*, qualifying families may receive a basic allowance “paid from the date of the child's birth to the last day of the month preceding their third birthday...[or] in the case of adoption... paid during the three years following the child's arrival.” With these combined allowances, qualifying families are provided the funds necessary to support their children in the early phases of life beyond what they may have been able to afford on their income alone.

Prestations liées à la naissance et à l'accueil de la petite enfance also include not means-tested benefits provided to all new families to aid with raising children. These benefits include *la prestation partagée d'éducation de l'enfant* (the shared child-rearing benefit)(PreParE), *le complément de libre choix d'activité* (the

supplement for free choice of working time)(CLCA), and *le complément optionnel de libre choix d'activité* (optional supplement for free choice of working time) (COLCA). All three benefits are offered in an effort to allow a parent, most often the mother, to stop working or cut down working hours in order to care for their child. The shared child-rearing benefit (PreParE) is paid to both parents for six months following the birth of the first child, 24 months following the birth of the second child, and 48 months following the birth of each additional child. The supplement for free choice of working time (CLCA) is paid for six months following the birth of the first child and up to the third birthday for every additional child. The optional supplement for free choice of working time (COLCA) is paid for exactly one year, regardless of number of children. The monthly amount a parent receives from one of these programs is dependent on their personal choice to continue working; the PreParE/CLCA comes to “390.52 € at the full rate (total cessation of work), 252.46 € at the partial rate when a parent cuts back to a maximum of 50% of the legal work week, and 145.63 € at the partial rate when a parent cuts back to between 50% and 80% of the legal work week.” The amount for COLCA is a flat 638.34€, the larger sum accounting for income lost when one parent completely gives up work, but paid for a shorter period of time than PreParE or CLCA.

In addition to the aforementioned childrearing benefits, French parents are given substantial parental leave by the government. French women receive 16 weeks of maternity leave with 70% pay, and French men receive two weeks paternity leave with up to 100% pay. Given the choice to resume full-time work after parental leave is granted, families are offered benefits to supplement for free

choice of childcare, referred to as *le complément de libre choix du mode de garde* (CMG). Like the child-rearing benefits, the CMG looks to aid families in raising children, particularly in the face of professional limitations. The CMG is used in the event that a parent or couple decided to forego free childcare services in exchange for a registered or in-home caretaker. The benefit “includes partial coverage (up to 85%) of childcare costs, depending on the child’s age and household income...[and] total or partial coverage of [the] employer’s contributions [to a child’s caretaker].” The CMG, combined with all other benefits, provide parents with the flexibility and freedom to choose their childrearing preferences without the threat of losing a job, supplemental income, or necessary childcare.

C. Prestations à affectation spéciale (Benefits for Special Purposes)

Lastly, *la politique familiale* includes special benefits for those families who have a child with special needs or those who face extreme personal circumstances. While these families are in the minority, the benefits provided are crucial to offset the often-expensive costs of accommodating special circumstances. These benefits encompass a wide range of situations, from supporting a child with disabilities to finding affordable housing. The two most notable benefits for special purposes are *l'allocation d'éducation de l'enfant handicapé* (the education allowance for a disabled child) and *l'allocation journalière de présence parentale* (the daily parental attendance allowance). *L'allocation d'éducation de l'enfant handicapé* is a non-means tested benefit given to every parent of a “severely disabled child under 20 years of age.” This benefit supplements the added cost of special education, the costs

associated with the disability itself, and the loss of income for a parent who stays at home to care for the child. In addition to this benefit, *l'allocation journalière de présence parentale* is also available to account for any parent burdened with a child that requires constant care. *L'allocation journalière de présence parentale* is “paid to any person looking after a child under 20 and suffering from a disease or severe handicap requiring constant assistance and attendance.” As constant care often precedes loss of professional opportunity and income, this allowance grants parents the ability to care for their children without sacrificing the funds necessary to do so. In combination with all other elements of *la politique familiale*, these benefits create security for all French households, thereby supporting the general population in their efforts to create a stable family life.

IV. Analysis and Comparison of Trends

Looking at the unique practices and trends present in the United States and France, it is clear that both countries have notably different approaches in supporting women and their balance between family and career. The United States, marked by a consistent hands-off approach to aiding women and work-life balance, grants the responsibility of creating family benefits to private industry. This choice creates a disparity between women in different industries, professions, and socio-economic statuses and their ability to care for their families while still maintaining job and income security. France, on the other hand, offers universal coverage that equalizes the opportunities amongst all female citizens to support their families, regardless of profession or socioeconomic status. However, even with differences in practice between the two countries, there are still statistical trends that prove to be consistent amongst American and French women and their personal and professional choices. After synthesizing the data and comparing the practices between the United States and France, I believe that there are three core areas for discussion: family benefits and participation in the labor force, the existence polarized benefits, and correlation between professional status and fertility rates.

A. Family Benefits and Participation in the Labor Force

One of the biggest areas of difference between the United States and France is the participation of mothers in the labor force. As discussed earlier, the two countries have very different approaches; the U.S. does not have a universal standard of family benefits beyond the stipulations of the Family and Medical Leave

Act of 1993, while France holds a comprehensive and universal standard of family benefits provided by *la politique familiale*. Some of the most important benefits included within this class of politics include paid maternity leave, paid family leave, and childcare benefits, all of which allow women the flexibility to take time to care for their family while still being able to participate in their chosen profession. Upon consideration of these two systems, the biggest question is not related to the number of benefits available, but rather to how these benefits affect the professional choices of women.

After looking at the data, it is clear that there is a strong correlation between longer, paid maternity leave (alongside other family benefits) and the participation of women in the labor force. When comparing female participation rates between the United States and France, the ratio of female to male workers is more or less equal; women compose 46.8 percent of the labor force in the U.S. and 47.8 percent in France. While these rates are close, differences arise in the proportion of the entire female population choosing to work. In the United States, 57 percent of women over the age of 16 participate in the labor force, either working full-time or part-time. France has a substantially higher participation rate among women at 67 percent for women of the same age range. With this ten percent difference, it is important to consider possible reasons behind this disparity.

One notable consideration is the correlation between female labor force participation and the availability of family benefits. In France, the group of women with the highest participation rate in the workforce is mothers in couples, with 67.3 percent of these demographic actively working. The second highest demographic is

single mothers, with 59.5 percent participation. These statistics contradict a basic assumption about women in the workforce: that women with children do not have the time to dedicate to a career, and vice-versa. It is not surprising that this high participation rate of mothers exists within a system that provides guaranteed paid maternity leave and comprehensive childcare benefits. The stark contrast between the demonstrated trends in the United States further stresses the importance of family benefits; among part-time workers, 66.1 percent of whom are women, the decision to work part time is overwhelmingly influenced by non-economic reasons including childcare and family obligations. Furthermore, the low number of American citizens who receive paid family leave and/or childcare benefits demonstrates the pressure to choose between work and family. With the number of stay-at-home mothers on the rise in the U.S., it is worth wondering what proportion of the female workforce is being sacrificed to the rigid demands of childcare.

B. Polarized Benefits vs. Universal Coverage

The next point of discussion regarding trends in the U.S. and France is the issue of polarized benefits. While both systems have special means-tested policies put in place to cater to mothers on the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum, the United States shows a considerable amount of inequality amongst women throughout all industries and economic situations in terms of support and services provided. In a capitalist system seemingly based on the merit of hard work and dedication, the United States provides unexpectedly polarized benefits to mothers, bringing the greatest advantage to women on the lowest and highest end of the

socioeconomic spectrum. Unlike France, which provides a universal standard of support to all women, the U.S. system creates an unfair distribution of benefits, thereby limiting women and their professional choices.

Looking at the distribution of family benefits and support in the United States, it is clear that the nation's practices unintentionally favor highly professional women and women at a socioeconomic disadvantage. By leaving the availability of family benefits to the discretion of private industry, women in more professional domains receive the highest rates of paid family leave and childcare benefits. These women, who often participate in fields such as management, finance, nursing, and education, find themselves at the higher end of the economic spectrum due to the educational requirements of their chosen professions and more standardized practices of those industries. By contrast, more blue-collar jobs such as transportation, construction, and maintenance have the lowest rates of family benefits. With these demonstrated differences in benefits between industries, it is suggested that women are compelled to choose certain fields over others to ensure necessary family support.

By contrast of industry practices, the federal government of the United States wildly favors women on the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Social programs such as TANF, Medicaid, and WIC provide mothers with comprehensive benefits to aid them in raising a family. These benefits include stipends to help with childcare, medical coverage, and funds for food – all benefits that the vast majority of American mothers do not receive, even from their employers. Only women within the most unfortunate economic situations are eligible for these federally funded

benefits, which, combined with the benefits received by highly professional women, leave an enormous group of women at a distinct disadvantage: working women of the American middle class. In France, the disparity in benefits between different professions and economic levels does not exist, providing all women with a baseline level of support when raising a family. With this baseline level of support, there is no pressure to choose one profession over another; instead, women are free to select their career as they please, with the added security of family benefits regardless of profession.

C. Income, Professional Success, and Fertility Rate

The last element of consideration when comparing the U.S. and France is the personal, family-oriented choices of professional women. When looking at attitudes of work-life balance, it is imperative to explore how the decision to have a family is affected by the career choices and professional obligations that women in a society hold. Different practices may be indicative of a cultural difference, societal pressures and limitations, or personal values. On the other hand, similarities may signify cross-cultural unity, suggesting trends shared by the universal community of women. By looking at these trends, we aim to find what drives women to make their personal choices, thereby learning about shifting values and priorities.

Despite the many differences between the systems in the U.S. and France, women in both cultures find a point of similarity between level of professional success and the choice to have a family. Upon analysis of trends and statistics, both countries demonstrate a negative correlation between a woman's educational level

and income and the number of children she has. Higher education and income correspond with a lower birth rate amongst French and American women, indicating a more unified trend that goes beyond culture or policy. This trend exists despite the fact that professional French women have more socialized resources that allow them to continue working while still having the time to care for their families, a luxury that many American women do not enjoy. Furthermore, the lower birth rate for women of a higher professional caliber persists despite monetary incentives included within the child benefit to have more children. The fact that professional women in both cultures demonstrate this same tendency suggests an underlying commonality in attitudes and perspectives.

In considering the negative correlation between higher education, income, and birth rate, one is compelled to speculate the underlying reasons for this cross-cultural similarity. The reason could be something as simple as timing – Those women who acquire advanced degrees spend a longer time in school and in the preliminary stages of their career, thereby potentially putting their family plans on hold. Given the fact that fertility rates drop drastically after the age of 35, women who spend a longer time in school and developing their careers may simply have fewer fertile years in which they can physically bear children. On the contrary, reasons for professional to have fewer children may also be an overarching preference related to the personality type of ambitious, career-driven women. Those women who find joy and fulfillment from their professional lives may be less compelled to seek out the same fulfillment from having a large family, instead choosing to have only one or two children. Regardless of the reasoning behind it, the

trend of professional women having fewer children in both the United States and France creates common ground between the two cultures, providing unity for women in the professional world.

V. Conclusion

Through this analysis, it is clear that the political and cultural practices of a nation have great influence on the choices available to women in their pursuit of happiness and success. While a universal community of women exists in many regards, the comparison of practices within the United States and France demonstrates that the benefits and opportunities made available to women can greatly influence how they go about choosing to create a family, a career, and a balance between the two. The United States, known for its capitalist roots and high value on ambition, does not offer comprehensive benefits or foster a culture that caters specifically to the needs of the working mother. This system often puts pressure on women to figure out how to balance professional and family life on their own, sometimes resulting in women choosing one path while compromising another. France, on the other hand, creates a more universal support system for women and families, thereby allowing more flexibility and opportunity to have a family and career. However, despite these differences, we still see a degree of disparity between professional success and motherhood in both cultures, signifying a more unified trend amongst women everywhere.

Looking at these findings, we are open to wonder if it is truly possible for a woman to “have it all”: fulfilling family life, successful career, and opportunity to enjoy life as she chooses. As women gain more power and autonomy within society, it is now their responsibility to use these strides to create a world where this is possible. This change has been underway for decades, but there is still more room

for advancement. The strongest advocates for women are fellow women; they are the only ones who share the same barriers and aspirations. In a way, women must continue to reach higher levels of success in order to have the power to advocate for their rights as mothers and caretakers. As more and more women continue to become leaders in the professional and political world, we see more and more opportunities for them to demand the changes necessary to create a society that supports a more holistic view of female capability. However, the first step in this effort is to look at the practices of other cultures to find ways to improve our own. From this point on, the international community of women can work together to find solutions, making it even more possible for every woman to “have it all.”

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