

*More Than a Decade of Research:
The Project on Global Working Families*

I founded the Project on Global Working Families in order to address these unanswered questions and to shed light on the experiences of working families across the boundaries of class and country. Since the 1990s, my research group at Harvard has talked to and learned from thousands of working families around the world. Our studies have ranged from in-depth interviews of more than 1,000 families in Latin America, Africa, Asia, North America, and Europe, to analyzing survey data on 55,000 families around the world, to examining the extent of public policies supporting working parents and their children in 180 countries. More than thirty research and staff assistants and thirty students have contributed. The intense research efforts I have been fortunate to lead are based on a series of beliefs:

- First, it is important to know the conditions that working parents and their children are facing worldwide.
- Second, it is essential to understand what conditions families face across all social groups, from the working poor to the affluent.
- Third, it is important to use a methodologically rigorous approach to gathering the evidence, so that one can rely on the ascertained facts.
- Fourth, knowing the facts in detail is the best foundation for learning how to improve the opportunities available for children and families.

As this book is based on our research, what follows is a brief overview of the studies conducted. For those interested in greater detail, it is provided in the appendixes.

Mapping the Demographic Transition

In the first global studies we undertook, we asked how families and the nature of the labor force have changed. We looked at how many children parents are having, how often adults are caring for the elderly, how often they receive help from other family members, and where they are living, among other questions. At the same time, we examined who is joining the workforce, how

extensively they are working in the formal sector, what kind of work they are doing, and what conditions they are facing. To do this, we drew on data that we were able to obtain from the World Bank;² the World Health Organization;³ the International Labor Organization;⁴ the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization;⁵ and other global organizations covering more than 180 countries. When data were available only for recent years, we examined information from those years in detail. However, whenever possible, we looked at historical trends by examining data for those 180 nations over a forty-year period. Understanding what has changed for families and for work over the past forty years around the world is essential to understanding why we face the current dilemmas.

The broad strokes painted by the statistics we were able to obtain and analyze were clear: There has been a dramatic transformation in the workforce worldwide, with hundreds of millions of people leaving the home or farm to join the formal labor force; the majority of both men and women are in the labor force in nearly every region in the world; more than 930 million children under fifteen are being raised in households in which all of the adults work;⁶ and elderly and disabled adults are increasingly in need of new solutions for how their basic care needs will be met.

National and Regional Surveys of Households from around the World

The global data, however, did not allow us to examine any details behind the statistics. What effect have these changes had on infants, six-year-old girls starting school, or eighty-three-year-old grandfathers no longer able to care for themselves? In carrying out the first analytic studies of working families that are truly global in scope, my goal was to understand the experiences of working men and women worldwide when they had to balance earning enough money to survive with caring for those they love—their daughters and sons, their parents, disabled family members, and others. The daunting aspect of this research was determining how, given our resource constraints, to begin to cover this important topic on a global scale.

We analyzed closed-ended data from national household surveys of more than 55,000 people in five regions and seven nations that are diverse geographically, economically, and politically: the United States, Mexico, Brazil,

Russia, South Africa, Botswana, and Vietnam. (See appendix A for details on these studies.) We were able to look at how commonly children are being raised in single-parent, two-parent, and extended-family households; how often they are being reared in families in which all adults work; the frequency of health problems that working parents need to address; the availability of early childhood care; and the extent to which school-age children were being pulled out of school to act *in loco parentis*.

We supplemented the analyses we could conduct using available national data by conducting large surveys of our own—both at national levels and within diverse urban areas. Sometimes these large surveys were designed to give us a new kind of information that no one had ever collected before. For example, working with colleagues in the United States, we asked a representative national sample of more than 1,000 Americans every day for a week the extent of cutbacks they needed to make in their work and other daily activities to care for family members. At other times, the surveys were designed to gain more knowledge of especially pressing issues. For example, in Botswana, we interviewed more than 1,000 working caregivers about the critical issues they were facing as they struggled to care for their children, care for family members affected by AIDS, and economically survive (see appendix B).

Interviews with Families Worldwide

In order to be able to interview hundreds or thousands of people and to be able to summarize what is learned, those conducting large surveys typically ask closed-ended questions. However, closed-ended questions are, by definition, limited in their response options. For example, a survey question might ask, “Do you spend time caring for your mother or father while working?” whereas an interviewer conducting an open-ended interview could say, “Please tell me about all the different people you are caring for, what you do for each of them, and what their relationship is to you.” More importantly, closed-ended questions are limited to the ideas that the researcher, journalist, or other interviewer had in designing the study. Open-ended questions and in-depth interviews—when done well—allow the individuals being interviewed to raise whatever they believe to be the most important issues. The respondents may cite problems, concerns, successes, and opportunities for and barriers to improvement that the interviewer had never considered. Particu-

larly rich data can result from the participants' ability to raise these new issues and to discuss the important topics of the interview in different ways. To add to our analyses of large multinational surveys the insights unique to in-depth, open-ended approaches, my research team and I conducted lengthy interviews of more than 1,000 parents, childcare providers, teachers, and health-care providers about the experience of working parents and their children in North America, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. This book will share the stories these families shared with us, as well as the statistics that resulted from our research.

Wherever possible, we interviewed representative samples of those using public services or samples representative of all households in a geographic area.⁷ Additionally, in the studies I've led, we have always invested time and resources in ensuring a high response rate.⁸ Our studies' response rates average over 80 percent. (Details on individual studies can be found in appendix C.)

Analyses of Public Policies Affecting Families Worldwide

Finally, having developed both a qualitative and a quantitative understanding of the difficulties that millions of families around the world are confronting, we wanted to understand what was already being done about these difficulties before making any recommendations. Therefore, my group looked at public policies from around the world that have been designed to meet working families' needs. We examined what 180 countries have been doing to improve the working conditions that all of us face, as well as what countries have been doing to help struggling families ensure that the basic needs of their children, elderly parents, and other family members can be met.

In particular, we examined both the extent to which basic rights were guaranteed in the workplace and the availability of social supports in the community. We conducted primary analyses of all legislation that was available either in the original or translated into English, French, or Spanish. This included legislation from 128 countries. We analyzed data on social security systems from 160 countries and conducted an extensive review of educational and service data available from a wide range of UN agencies and other global intergovernmental organizations. (See appendix D for details.)