

# Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care

By Vicki Shabo and  
Jasmine Heyward

## How TV and Film Can Help Create the Gender-Equitable, Caring Country We Need

Hollywood can help drive progress for working people and families through authentic narratives about gender, work, family, and care—and showing what more supportive systems would look like.

**Storytellers can make a difference by giving visibility to the realities that most people face as they manage jobs and family.** Stories can illuminate the factors that affect parents and family caregivers, including the availability (or lack) of affordable paid family and medical leave, child care, and care for older and disabled loved ones, along with concerns about finances, health, and workplace stigma. Cultural specificity in storytelling about gender, work, family, and care is also critically important.

TV and film narratives can contribute to upending the cultural myth that individual grit is the only key to success at work and at home, and instead show how shifts in policies and practices can help ensure that all people can thrive.



# Why now?

In recent years, many people's lives have been dramatically affected by:

- **Cataclysmic events**, including a global pandemic and disasters, that led to unprecedented disruptions in workplaces and homes and created hardships for families with young children and other loved ones in need of care;
- **Economic, political, and technological disruptions** that contribute to feelings of instability for working people and families and help fuel a sense that “you're on your own”;
- **The loss of reproductive rights**, resulting in forced parenthood or maternal health tragedies for some, along with health care, caregiving, and economic hardships for many; and
- **Missed opportunities** for national investments in paid family and medical leave, child care, and elder care that would have helped mitigate difficulties for parents and caregivers and reduced workplace biases and barriers.

Most people in the United States want a more supported and stable future. Narratives that help people make sense of their circumstances and offer different possible futures can help pave the way for change.

# Why entertainment?

Entertainment media captures people's attention and imagination in ways that news media does not. It plays an important role in shaping our shared story so that all people—regardless of gender, race, income, disability, or any other factor—feel seen.

Television and film storytelling can integrate realities that **inspire understanding of ourselves and others and help us imagine a time when everyone can thrive at work, care for their loved ones, and achieve economic security and opportunity.**

This is essential in a time of division and uncertainty, in which zero-sum thinking too often interferes with compassion and limits our potential.



# How storytellers can help.

Storytellers can help move the needle by showing that work and family care are ever-present in people's lives by bringing these realities into pop culture. Work and family stories are human, emotional stories. They can be funny, tragic, suspenseful, poignant, and everything in between. Storytellers can:

- **Make work and family care challenges visible and explicit, and show how they can cause tensions**, so that viewers who share these lived experiences will feel seen and connected to others.
- **Highlight the systemic failures—rather than lack of individual grit or initiative—that contribute to work-family conflict**, and how these failures are rooted in gender, racial, and economic inequalities and harmful stereotypes.
- **Change the way we show gender, work, family, and care challenges:**
  - Discard the fallacy that, for most women, working for pay outside the home is a “choice.”
  - Explore how constraints related to care and pay often force women to work in lower-paid jobs, for fewer hours, and in the face of bias.
  - Dispel the myth that work-family issues are primarily a challenge for middle-class white women by highlighting the ways that work-family and care challenges affect women in many types of jobs, especially women of color.
  - Illustrate that men face work-family challenges too, and show men as competent parents and caregivers.
  - Call out the harms that arise from stigmatizing people at all professional levels—from white collar to service workers—who take parental leave, have child or elder care responsibilities, or need flexibility at work to manage work-family issues.
  - Portray the ways that caregiving affects the finances, careers, and social lives of all people providing unpaid care to loved ones.
- **Show that paid leave and child care public policies are helping in some states as scaffolding for individuals and businesses**, and illustrate the difference that good-versus-bad workplace policies and cultures can make in people's lives.



## Did you know?

Women are half of the U.S. population, nearly half the workforce, and more often than not, contribute substantially to a family's household income. Most women in the paid workforce also care for at least one child or a loved one, which requires their attention to both work and family. But, on screen, **women's lives are more segregated**. They're often depicted as either focused on their home with paid work playing little-to-no role, or in high-pressure work roles without reference to family life. They're **almost never portrayed as their family's main breadwinner**, according to the Geena Davis Institute in research conducted for MomsFirst.

Men's caregiving has increased over time in U.S. households. Fathers are increasingly providing more hands-on care to children, and men make up **more than 40 percent** of the primary caregivers to disabled or aging loved ones. Yet on screen, fathers are often **represented as incompetent or abusive**, according to research by the Geena Davis Institute for Equimundo. This can reinforce outdated gender norms that pigeonhole women as "naturally better" caregivers.

In the U.S., **53 million adults** provide care to a loved one, yet caregiving is depicted on screen in fewer than 11 percent of scripted television shows. Care for children—including disabled children—and loved ones is overwhelmingly shown as "women's work," according to research by the Geena Davis Institute for Caring Across Generations. However, thoughtful depictions can make a difference. Research on NBC's *This is Us* conducted by the Norman Lear Center for Caring Across Generations found that **caregiving stories on screen helped viewers** to see their own struggles as connected to others and spurred discussion of their lives in the context of the show.

There is no longer a dominant family style in the United States, and the majority of children are raised in families where all available parents work. Child care is expensive and can be difficult to find. Yet, on screen, **child care arrangements are shown infrequently** and unrealistically.

Work, finances, and social connections are all affected by the need to provide care to loved ones. Access—or lack of access—to paid family and medical leave and high-quality affordable child and elder care can make or break women's workforce participation, earnings, and retirement security. On screen, **these connections are hardly ever depicted or discussed**. Showing the ways that providing care is deeply connected to every other aspect of a person's life and decision-making—rather than isolated from them—is critical.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, more than half of U.S. states have severely restricted or banned abortion outright, while others have strengthened reproductive rights protections. Medication abortion, which is a common method of care, is under attack. More people face serious health risks, transportation and care challenges, and unwanted parenthood. Most abortion-seekers are already parents, and most are also not white and not wealthy, according to the Abortion Onscreen project at Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health. Television and film portrayals are often inaccurate and lack context. More attention to **authentic and holistic depictions** of the health care, economic, and family realities of pregnant people would help audiences develop a more sophisticated, empathetic understanding of people's lives.

People in the United States have very individualistic views of the economy and poverty, health and caregiving, and personal responsibility—and this is fueled by **news and scripted television** storytelling. Research underscores **troubling trends in individualistic, fatalistic thinking**—but stories can shift these perceptions. Describing connections between problems and solutions at the correct scale, naming systemic factors at play, and showing interdependence can help shift individualistic culture toward systems thinking, according to separate research by the Frameworks Institute and the Norman Lear Center.



# Audiences love to see it!

Research tells us that nuanced stories about work, family, and care are rare. A survey conducted for New America's Better Life Lab by MarketCast also found that **84 percent of streaming viewers want to see more of them**. Here are some of our favorite examples:

- In ABC's ***High Potential***, a 2024-25 season hit, lead character Morgan is a divorced mom of three who negotiates for child care costs when accepting a consulting job with the L.A. Police Department. She often talks about her children at work while also being a high performing team member. Her ex-husband, Ludo, is an equal, competent co-parent.
- In the opening episode of the seventh season of CBS's ***The Neighborhood***, new dad Marty tells his own father, Calvin, that he plans to take paid paternity leave to care for his infant daughter, Daphne. The show explains the benefits of paternity leave and taps into important generational differences around men and care. Marty also provides hands-on care to Daphne throughout the season.
- Netflix's ***Virgin River*** grapples with societal expectations for middle-class women, Lizzie and Mel, emphasizing that caring motherhood need not require giving up a professional identity. Season 3 also depicted a man, Preacher, as a capable guardian to a young child.
- On FX's ***The Bear***, characters have managed work opportunities while caring for a dying parent (Marcus), the stress of losing a job while supporting a family (Tina, in a magnificent flashback episode), working and parenting after a divorce (Richie), and managing work while pregnant (Natalie). These stories are integral to the characters' development and add relatable nuance to main plot points.
- In the final season of HBO's ***Insecure***, Molly, a lawyer, continued to work from her mother's hospital room and late at night rather than taking family caregiving leave. She did not tell her bosses that her mother had been hospitalized for fear that her commitment or competence would be questioned. When she confessed to a colleague, he told her about a similar incident with his brother and said, "Work can't matter more than real life."
- Over more than two decades, ABC's ***Grey's Anatomy*** has explored work-family gender norms, the maternal mental load, the need for child care, male characters providing hands-on care, the gender-based wage gap, and parental leave. These stories have appeared as passing references, stories-of-the-week, and long story arcs, showing different ways to integrate these topics into popular storytelling.

**The Better Life Lab at New America is focused on advancing gender and racial equity and work-family justice.**

We offer creatives in television, film, and advertising:

- Briefings on the latest research, news, and data to help inform storylines and characters—topics include gender roles, workplace and family dynamics in specific populations, reproductive rights and care, policies and practices, and their variations across the U.S.;
- Technical assistance, tips, and research to help shape storylines that reflect people's lived experiences with gender, work, family, and care;
- Script review and rough cut feedback;
- Amplification of content that offers accurate and helpful depictions of gender, work, family, and care, and content that opens the door to deeper discussions of these issues; and
- Social impact partnerships that advance shared goals.

**For additional resources for entertainment storytellers, visit [newamerica.org/entertainment](https://newamerica.org/entertainment). These include:**

**Original Research:**

- [MarketCast Values in Entertainment Study for New America's Better Life Lab: Key Findings from a Survey of Streaming Viewers and Social Media Analysis](#)

**Tip Sheets for Writers:**

- [Writing About Working Parents](#)
- [Writing About Civic Engagement with a Work-Family Lens](#)
- [Place-Based Storytelling About Time to Care](#)
- [Re-Scripting Depictions of Abortion and Pregnancy](#)
- [Fast Facts for Writers on Pregnancy and Abortion](#)
- [Writing About Paid Family & Medical Leave](#)

We also have a wealth of research, data, and analysis on gender, work, care, and work-family justice—including the systemic barriers affecting women, workers with care responsibilities, low-wage workers, workers of color, and immigrant workers. We also offer connections to other experts, advocates, and people with lived experience in many parts of the United States.

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For more information, please contact our entertainment initiative founder and director:

**Vicki Shabo**  
Senior Fellow, Better Life Lab at New America  
[shabo@newamerica.org](mailto:shabo@newamerica.org) or 202.847.4771