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

Hollywood can help drive progress for women and families by improving narratives about gender, work, family, and care—and showing what supportive systems look like.

Storytellers can make a big difference by showing the realities that most people face as they manage jobs and family. Stories must be clear about the policies at play that affect parents and caregivers to loved ones—such as the availability (or lack of) paid leave and child care and care for older and disabled loved ones—and question the stigma that exists for parents and caregivers at work.

TV and film can help get rid of the myth that individual grit is the key to success at work and at home, and instead show the systems we need to ensure that all people can truly survive and thrive.
Why this & why now?

In the wake of:

- **A global pandemic that caused unprecedented disruptions in workplaces and homes**, with outsized effects on women with young children, particularly for women of color;

- **The stripping away of abortion rights** that will result in forced births, health and care crises, and economic hardship; and

- **Policymakers’ failure to invest in national care policies** like paid family and medical leave, child care and elder care, combined with longstanding workplace stigmas surrounding parenthood and caregiving...

We must **disrupt the status quo** and do whatever it takes to ensure that all people—regardless of gender, race, economic level, disability, or any other factor—can **thrive at work, care for their loved ones, and achieve economic security and opportunity**.

How storytellers can help.

Storytellers can help move the needle by showing that managing work and family care is hard—and bringing this struggle, so often invisible, to the forefront of pop culture in realistic, relatable ways. Work and family stories are human, emotional stories. They’re funny, tragic, poignant and everything in between. Storytellers can:

- **Make work and family care challenges visible and explicit**, 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 lead to work-family conflict, and how these systemic failures are rooted in gender, racial, and economic inequalities and harmful stereotypes and biases.

- **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”;
  
  - Highlight the ways that work-family and care challenges affect women of color, in particular—in many types of jobs—to dispel the myth that work-family issues are primarily a challenge for middle-class white women;
  
  - Call out the stigmatization of people—usually women—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;
  
  - Clarify that gender inequality at work is most often the result of external, structural factors like the lack of care systems that contribute to lower-level jobs, pressure to ignore family responsibilities, unequal pay, and more—rather than women’s “choices” or behavior;
  
  - Portray the ways that caregiving affects the finances, careers, and social lives of people providing care; and
  
  - Show men as competent parents whose active participation in care is essential.

- **Show that government paid leave and child care policies are helping in some states** as a partner to individuals and businesses—and illustrate the difference that good-versus-bad workplace policies and cultures can make in people’s lives.
Women are half of the U.S. population and nearly half the workforce—but are just 27 percent of leading or co-leading roles on-screen, according to the Geena Davis Institute.

Most women in the U.S. work and most also provide care to at least one child or a loved one. Their home and work lives are deeply intertwined and became even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether as an at-home worker managing work and remote school or a frontline worker in need of on-site child care. But, on screen, women’s lives are more segregated—depicted most often in homes or in supporting roles at work, whereas men are more often shown primarily at work and in both white collar and blue collar jobs, according to research by a Brigham Young University scholar and the Think Tank for Equity and Inclusion.

Men’s caregiving has increased over time in U.S. households: Fathers provide more hands-on care to children than ever before, and men make up more than 40 percent of the primary caregivers of disabled or aging loved ones. Yet on screen, men are often portrayed as incompetent or abusive, according to the Geena Davis Institute and Equimundo—reinforcing outdated gender norms that pigeonhole women as “naturally” better caregivers. Caring Across Generations has pioneered work around men and care on screen and we’re beginning to see shifts, with more needed.

There is no longer any one dominant family style in the United States. The majority of children are being 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 often shown unrealistically or not at all.

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. 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.

In the wake of the Dobbs ruling as abortion is severely restricted or banned outright, more people will face serious health risks when they are forced to carry babies to term. Most people who have abortions are already parents. Abortion-seekers will need to manage immediate work and family obligations and need paid leave if they have to travel out of state for abortion care. How will they manage work, family, elder care and their own health down the road? By discussing these extended challenges beyond unplanned pregnancy and abortion, TV and film can help audiences to think holistically about support systems that working people and families need while at the same time providing realistic portrayals of reproductive health decision-making and abortion itself.

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, according to multiple studies by the Norman Lear Center and research by the FrameWorks Institute. But younger people’s views are shifting on economic issues, according to FrameWorks, and this shift creates an opportunity to tell stories about the positive power of collective action and systemic solutions—including public investments in paid leave, child care, and elder care.

Did you know?

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We love to see it!

We applaud the way TV has tackled caregiving in the lives of beloved characters in comedy and drama. Food for thought:

- In 2017, Black-ish seasons 3 and 4 used Dre and Bow’s impending parental leave arrangements to demonstrate the stigma that men face when they request paternity leave; the realities of pregnancy discrimination and motherhood discrimination that mothers face in workplaces; the effects of post-partum depression; and the challenges of returning to work after parental leave.

- In 2018, Superstore season 4 explored disparities in the healthcare system, inadequacies in maternity leave and workplace lactation policies through Amy’s pregnancy storyline, as well as the emotional and physical toll of new parenthood.

- In 2021, Insecure season 5 depicted Molly, a lawyer, continuing to work from her mother’s hospital room and late at night while her mother is hospitalized, rather than taking family caregiving leave. She did not tell her bosses that her mother had been hospitalized and feared that her commitment or ability to produce high-quality work would be questioned if she explained her family health emergency to her colleagues.

- In 2021, the opening scenes of the first episode of the limited series Scenes from a Marriage portrayed Jon, a father who takes on primary child care, and Mira, a working mother, telling an interviewer that Mira is still making up at work for her maternity leave in order to prove her commitment.

- In 2022, season 18, a Grey’s Anatomy doctor, Jo, who is a single parent, explained to a single-mother-to-be patient that the hospital’s provision of on-site child care to its employees is the only way she is able to keep working after becoming a parent. Throughout its 18 seasons’ story arcs and passing references, Grey’s Anatomy has taken on work-family gender norms, named the need for child care, depicted male characters providing hands-on care, called out the gender-based wage gap, and referenced parental leave in multiple episodes.

- Throughout five seasons, This Is Us showed different models of two-earner families—with shifting burdens and sacrifices in one case (Beth and Randall) and the acceptance and push-back on the dominant female caregiver/male breadwinner stereotype in the other (Kate and Toby). This Is Us also did a stellar job showing men involved in care and caregiving and portraying the joys and pains of caregiving overall, also partnering with Caring Across Generations, Hilarity for Charity, and Us Against Alzheimer's to elevate the impact of the 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 related to gender, work, family and care to help inform storylines and characters;

- Technical assistance, tips, and research to help make storylines realistic and in service to people’s lived experiences with gender, work, family and care;

- Feedback and script review;

- 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

- Ideas for action based on storylines that audiences can take to advance public and private sector policy changes.

Additional Better Life Lab resources for entertainment storytellers, in partnership with Storyline Partners:

- Writing About Women, Work and Care: Long Road Back from the Pandemic

- Writing About Paid Family and Medical Leave

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

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To read online, visit newamerica.org/tip-sheet/re-scripting-gender-work-family-and-care