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Commonwealth of Massachusetts

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A Feminized Work Force, A Humanized Workplace

Evelyn Murphy

Enhancing the opportunities for women in the workplace in the next decade will become an economic imperative, not just an issue of social justice. In this article Lieutenant Governor Evelyn Murphy sets forth recommendations for policymakers in both the public and private sector that begin to change our notions of what constitutes a humanized workplace. If the economy is to remain strong, these initiatives will be required to improve business productivity as well as the life of all family members.

Serving in two state cabinet posts, Environmental Affairs and Economic Affairs, I learned first hand the importance of having a long-term perspective for day-to-day decisions. Officials are often forced to respond to crises. The rush of business and the fragmentation of agencies make it difficult for policymakers to take a long-range view of issues and to consider the ways in which they intersect.

As lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, I set out to create a strategic plan for the future of the state, “Blueprint 2000.” Its purpose is to chart a course for Massachusetts that will help ensure that all our citizens — women, men, and children — enjoy the highest possible quality of life into the twenty-first century.

“Blueprint 2000” Findings

Overall, the future for the Massachusetts economy looks bright.¹ Although the explosive growth of the past few years is slowing down, we can anticipate a steady, healthy growth for the rest of the century.²

Experts involved in the study found that despite current fiscal problems, the Massachusetts economy is fundamentally strong and can remain so if the state, working cooperatively with business and citizens, continues to invest in people, productivity, and new technologies. If present trends continue, we can expect:

1. A labor shortage in most sectors.

Evelyn Murphy, lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, has also served as its secretary of Economic Affairs and secretary of Environmental Affairs.

2. Manufacturing will, at best, stabilize at its current levels.
3. We will become increasingly a “service-based” economy.
4. The number of defense dollars coming into our state will, at best, stay constant and perhaps decline.
5. Despite healthy growth, not all groups will benefit equally.

According to forecasters, the labor force of Massachusetts will grow by about 130,000 people by the end of the century. At the same time new jobs could grow by 450,000.³ This would mean more than three new jobs for every potential worker.

Given the tightness of the projected labor market, we will need to use the talents of every potential worker, especially those drawn from groups that have been underrepresented or underutilized in the work force.

In consideration of this, wise state policy in the next decade will require enhancing the opportunities for women to work, not just as a matter of social justice, but as an economic imperative.

Economic Opportunities and Challenges for Women

A tight labor market means that employers may be more likely to hire and promote women, thus providing greater opportunities for them.

The timing of these opportunities is fortuitous, given that more women than ever need to earn more income. Women who are single heads of households must provide for themselves and their families. Even women who are not running households alone must contribute to household income. The income of one wage earner is no longer enough to meet the high cost of living.

Women with children are economically compelled to work. Two thirds of Massachusetts women with children under age six work full time.⁴ In fact, Massachusetts has the highest employment rate for women in the nation — nearly 5 percent above the average.⁵

The more time women spend at work, the less they have to spend at home providing care for children, parents, and partners. How can the young, the old, the sick, and the disabled receive the care that was once provided by traditional homemakers in light of the demands on women today to be wage earners?

Affordable quality care services are scarce and locating them is difficult. The average annual cost of full-time day care for three- and four-year-olds was \$5,075 in 1987. The cost for infants and toddlers up to 2.9 years of age was \$7,325.⁶ The inability to find and pay for custodial services presents a major obstacle for women who want to enter the work force or increase their work hours. For example, a recent study concluded that 41 percent of nonworking parents with children under thirteen would seek employment if they could find affordable child care.⁷

Massachusetts has pioneered in providing child-care benefits to bridge the transition from welfare to work. We have also taken steps to expand child-care facilities in corporate and institutional settings. Nevertheless, much remains to be done. Although the tight labor market creates more job opportunities for women, there is no guarantee that women will be able to take advantage of them. Support, particularly day care and maternity leave, is essential if women are to participate fully in the work force.

Humane Work Policies Enhance Productivity

Although there has been increasing awareness of the problems of family and workplace, there has not been much systematic evaluation of the experience of employers who have adopted child-care programs. One such study indicates that humane work policies do improve productivity.⁸

Among the benefits that can accrue to employers who offer workers such perquisites as on-site child care are increased ability to attract employees, lowered employee absenteeism, and improved employee attitudes toward their bosses. Women who enjoy supportive work environments may tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, take fewer sick days, work more on their own time, work later into their pregnancies, and be more likely to return to work after childbirth than those whose employers are not so concerned with their employees' well-being.

Here in Massachusetts, many companies that have sponsored child-care programs have found it very rewarding all around. Arnold Hiatt says that since Stride Rite instituted on-site child care: absenteeism is down; productivity is up; worker morale is up; recruitment is easier. At every child-care center whose opening I attended — from Greico Brothers in Lawrence to Charlton Memorial Hospital in Fall River — the story is the same. Child care is a social *and* economic benefit!⁹

Recommendations for Action

In the 1990s we must humanize the workplace. We will need to recognize that women and men can share more equally in the joys and responsibilities of parenting and family care giving. There are a variety of policies that the state, in conjunction with business and citizens, can adopt to improve the situation.

Work Environment

Employers can consider a variety of ways to humanize their work environments: flextime; job sharing; voluntary reduction time in which employees reduce their schedules and their salaries in 5 percent increments to adjust to family responsibilities.¹⁰ Employers should be willing to pay equal wages for equal work and to promote workers on the basis of their job performance, not their gender.

Education

A good education is crucial for liberating women from sex-segregated occupations, which usually offer low pay. Girls need to know that jobs will be there for them, opportunities that offer paths for teenagers who might otherwise become caught in the social statistics of teenage pregnancy. Technical and vocational education is important to train women for available jobs, including those which are not traditionally held by females.¹¹ Higher education can give women information and credentials they need to reach top jobs in their chosen fields. Along with training and education, many women need assistance in finding the right spot for themselves, in terms of contacts and confidence.

Programs such as the Boston Compact have helped students in school by providing work experience and the incentive to attend college.¹² Initiatives to help youngsters who have dropped out of school and are not employed and scholarships to pay for apprenticeships with private employers and unions should be considered.

Not only women entering the labor market, but those already in it need education for job retraining. Policies to enhance human productivity and prepare women for evolving new occupations are vitally important. The Department of Employment and Training should offer clients information and counseling on lifelong training and career ladders.

Given the strong balances in the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund, the commonwealth should consider using a portion of these balances to establish a productivity-building training program.¹³ In the 1990s, the unemployment insurance benefit should be converted into an income-security-plus-training-and-education program.

One element for enhancing labor productivity is an expansion of the public higher education system of Massachusetts. The state's Board of Regents should develop a plan for community and state colleges and the state universities to respond to work force needs in education and training for twenty-first century jobs. Plans also should be made to secure private as well as public funding to respond to this challenge.

Child Care

We should be as concerned about the quality as the availability of child care. We should promote programs that provide a nurturing and learning experience as well as basic care. We should ensure that child-care providers receive decent training and decent pay. Experience shows that early childhood programs like Head Start, which have nutritional and developmental components, can go a long way toward preparing children to succeed in school, and later, in life.

The state should provide incentives to employers to provide child-care support for their workers. This support could take the form of vouchers or on-site child-care centers. If incentives do not stimulate employer response, the state could encourage more response through linkage programs.

Schools should be put to greater use for before- and after-school programs.

Flexible spending accounts could be expanded. These accounts allow working parents to request money to be withheld from their income for a child-care account, thus providing a tax break by removing savings income before federal income taxes. This program is already in place in a number of businesses and higher education institutions in Massachusetts.

Additionally, Massachusetts must continue to place a high priority on programs like Employment and Training (ET), which sustain child-care and health benefit supports for new workers until they can pay for these services themselves. ET, by enabling thousands of women with children to get off the welfare rolls for good, has made an important contribution to our labor force.

Employment Leave

Worker leave policies will need to be focused to deal with the new realities of both parents working: leave with job protection if a worker has an injury or illness; leave if a family member of the worker has a serious illness; leave when a newborn or adopted child comes into the family. These are the kinds of policies that are needed to respond to the new realities of the American family.

The Family and Workplace Subcommittee of "Blueprint 2000" has recommended the creation of a gubernatorial task force to study and make suggestions concerning the changing family and work life. I support that recommendation and hope that such a body would act on the initiatives I have sketched here.

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The challenge of the 1990s will be to ensure that women have equal opportunities in earning a livelihood, to encourage men to take their rightful place as full partners in raising families, and to humanize the workplace so that women and men can participate fully in the richness of both work and family life.

I believe that as more organizations introduce humane work policies, family life and business productivity will be enhanced.

A century ago people called for radical changes in the workplace — to abolish child labor and to reduce the work week to forty hours. Voices of protest claimed that these changes would destroy business. As the changes were adopted around the turn of the century, however, the United States entered a period of tremendous prosperity.

We face similar challenges now. If we adopt some of the changes I have proposed and incorporate them in the workplace, I believe we will release productive energy in new and unforeseen ways. A tight labor market provides the setting wherein these challenges can be met successfully. Good social policy and good economic policy go hand in hand. 🙏

Notes

1. The Division of Employment Security (DES) sees continued growth for the commonwealth, although not the explosive growth we have had. Also, leading economic indicators indicate that we can expect a steady, healthy growth for the rest of the century.
2. The rise of professional services and successful recycling of old manufacturing plants places Massachusetts in a highly advantageous position in comparison with other states. DES has projected that the economy will generate 400,000 net new jobs by 1995.
3. The 1989 level was 3,045,800 (DES); the 450,000 projection is from both DES and Data Resources Inc., an independent demographic/economic forecaster.
4. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1987.
5. "1987 Civilian Labor Forces Participation Rates, Unemployment Rates, and Employment/Population Ratios for Women (16+), U.S. and by State," Professor Andrew Sum of the Northeastern Center for Labor Market Studies.
6. "Caring for Our Commonwealth: The Economics of Child Care in Massachusetts," a study prepared for the Massachusetts Affordability Task Force by the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women and the Center for Survey Research, University of Massachusetts at Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Social Services, June 1988.
7. *Ibid.*, 27–28.
8. An April 1988 survey of 141 businesses by the *Personnel Journal* of California found that 80 percent of employers believe that the productivity and quality of the work force improve when all workers who need it have good child care available.
9. As secretary of Economic Affairs, I invited corporate CEOs to breakfast to speak with them and strongly encourage on-site child care. The benefits of low turnover, less sick time, and a more productive work force were pointed out. This strategy worked, and the Executive Office of Economic Affairs now has a permanent full-time staff person who handles the Corporate Child Care Program. The program serves as an information base for employers interested in learning exactly what it takes to install on-site child care. As of September 1989, there were 135 such centers, including those created by developers of office parks.
10. Flextime and on-site child care at One Ashburton Place are two examples.

11. There is a set-aside clause in the contract for the Central Artery project for women and minorities, as well as for local neighborhoods. The latter may be challenged, because there cannot be special set-asides for neighborhoods. But even if this one set-aside is successfully challenged, the other set-asides should not be affected.
12. The Boston Compact is a group of businesspeople who encourage businesses to get involved in the public school systems. In addition to those in the general business community, members of the Vault are also involved. The group has been in existence for approximately four years. Contributions of time and resources have varied; one corporation donated \$100,000 worth of computers to public schools.
13. Employers must contribute to the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund to provide for unemployment insurance.