Mobility and Flexibility Expand Working Mothers’ Success

By Yingling Fan | October 31, 2017

In the U.S., women have historically had less access to cars, but their traditional, gendered family roles have increased their share of household-related trips—think daycare pickup, grocery shopping, and the like. The mismatch between women’s mobility constraints and burdens has, in turn, created significant restrictions in women’s labor market choices. As a result, employed women’s work commute trips were, for decades, shorter in both distance and time than those of employed men.

Over time, women and men have played more similar roles at work and home. Since gender differences in travel behavior are often regarded as a “barometer” of gender equality, we can now ask whether the inverse is true: does greater workplace equality mean a better balance in work- and household-related trips?

In a recent study, I used data from the 2003–2010 American Time Use Survey to update our knowledge by asking: Do gender differences in travel behavior differ by family structure? Have gender differences vanished in some families but not others? How do gender differences respond to traditional aspects of family structure such as marriage and parenthood in light of the rise of childless households and single parenthood?

Data reveal that there is only a gender difference in work travel time when men and women are
Married, employed women with children tend to travel significantly less for work than married, employed fathers. In contrast, there is always a gender difference in household support travel if women have children.

Single or married, mothers tend to do more household-support travel than do fathers.

Traditional family constructs (including marriage and parenthood) remain relevant factors in explaining gender differences in mobility access and need. Women, especially those who are married and have children, remain disadvantaged in mobility. And though I have not quantified the idea, it seems clear that this disadvantage is amplified among low-income mothers.

Decreasing this gender disparity will require federal, state, and local policies that address the different mobility needs of men and women.

Beyond longer-term solutions, such as increasing women’s household mobility resources and the gender division of care in heterosexual households, a shorter-term solution is found in pursuing alternative and flexible work schedules to accommodate the varied scheduling needs of men and women. There are labor policies in Vermont, New Hampshire, Seattle, and San Francisco to protect workers from retaliation should they request flexible scheduling. Such policies also mandate greater work predictability, since unpredictable work schedules not only increase the complexities of transportation needs, but also influence parents’ ability to obtain and retain childcare. Expanding these policies may allow women with children greater choice in employment by giving them the ability to travel farther and longer for work, at their own choice. Further, we should expect long-term accruing benefits in the form of greater wage parity and lower maternal discrimination in hiring.

Yingling Fan is an Associate Professor at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota.

Photo by nbreazeale