



## Conversations with the Experts

### Public Policy and the Discontinuities of Social Change



Randy Albelda

**Bio:** Randy Albelda is a professor of economics in the Economics Department and the Public Policy Ph.D. Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Dr. Albelda has focused her research and teaching on a range of issues that have important policy implications, including women's economic status, welfare reform, and family structure.

Albelda has authored and co-authored a number of books, articles and reports focused on policies that affect the well-being of working families. One of her most recent works, *Filling the work and family gap: Paid parental leave in Massachusetts*, is a report coauthored with Tiffany Manuel. This report was published in 2000 by the Labor Resource Center, College of Public and Community Service, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Albelda also co-authored a report, *Choices and tradeoffs: The parent survey of child care in Massachusetts*, which was published in 1999 by Parents United for Child Care. Parents United for Child Care has graciously given permission for the Sloan Work-Family Researchers Electronic Network to post a pdf version of this report on the website.

### An Interview with Randy Albelda

Many people become confused and frustrated when they try to analyze the US work-family policy puzzle. It is difficult to get an accurate assessment of the current status of policy-making with regard to work and family issues, in part because some of the pertinent policies are "family" policies and others are "work" policies, but few are work/family policies. To complicate matters more, some policies are promulgated at the state level and other at the national level. Given the variability in the responsiveness of different states, US policies seem like a fluid mosaic.

But Randy Albelda from the University of Massachusetts Boston is undaunted. She is hopeful that the public policy arena will soon reflect a deepened understanding of work/family fundamentals. Albelda feels that the work/family dimension of a range of public policies has been invisible for some time, and that soon the links between work/family realities and a range of public policies – from education to health care to income policies – will become more apparent.

According to Albelda, some people think too narrowly when they identify the band of public policies that could be considered work/family policy. Using education policies as an example, she stated, "Educational policies for children in kindergarten through grade 12 have a big impact on the work/family experiences of working families. The length of the school day and schools' annual calendar create constraints on parents' choices."

Albelda admits that the US is an outlier when it comes to family-oriented policies. Other countries have made decisions that it is in the public interest to share with families the costs of raising children. These nations feel that it is in their countries' best interests to share particular expenses, such as those associated with the provision of health care to children. Albelda observed, "America has an explicit public policy not to share most of the costs associated with child rearing with families."

In the United States, we tend to leave the quality of family life up to the market. Therefore, in the United States, we feel that it is an acceptable state of affairs that some (and only some) employers provide certain work/family policies and programs. And, it is acceptable that some (but only some) employees have access to work/family policies and

programs. Albelda challenges work/family leaders to focus more attention to the gaps that exist between the supports that have been established at some workplaces and the provisions of existing public policy.

"Workplaces can and should do some things for their employees, but they can't do it all. It is the role of public policies to set the expectations for what corporations should do and then make provisions to complement workplace policies and programs," said Albelda.

Albelda is adamant that the fight for universal health care coverage is a work/family issue, although it may not be on the agendas of all work/family advocates. Similarly, she considers the fight for guaranteed income to be a work/family priority. In fact, Albelda feels that virtually all social welfare policies are work/family policies, to one extent or another. She stated, "Certainly, a lot of people are talking about issues such as universal health care. However, we usually do not talk about health care, housing, or the minimum wage as work/family issues. And, most work/family researchers do not investigate these issues in any direct way."

The discontinuities in public policies and social institutions can create significant work/family dilemmas for some families. Albelda observed that families have changed, the workforce and jobs have changed, but many labor policies have not. This institutional discontinuity creates additional stress for working families. Albelda further discussed the example of welfare reform. "Welfare reform essentially said that our country does not believe that a woman deserves to be a mother unless she is either employed or married to someone who can support her and her child. However, this poses a problem for most low-income single mothers because there are so few employment opportunities paying a living wage for women with limited skills. We changed the rules of our social welfare policies, but we did not change the nature of low-wage work." Albelda recommends that public policies should establish systems of care for families – especially low-income families – and children caught in the institutional shifts. What types of policies would best address the work/family priorities of low-income families? Albelda would support a package of supports including universal health care, living wages, wage supports and other benefits that could decrease the crises resulting from income instability, such as caregiving stipends, housing assistance, child care, paid leave, and school age care.

Albelda commented, "Public policy options sometimes seem distant. At other times, they are perceived as being obtrusive. But in reality, they can often offer simple, direct solutions to the work/family dilemmas of American families." The well-being of our children depends on providing them basic securities. Albelda is an articulate advocate for the creation of public policies that provide social securities to all families.

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E-mail: [wfnetwork@bc.edu](mailto:wfnetwork@bc.edu) - Phone: 617-552-4033 / 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-1080

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