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## Book Review

*Meyer, Madonna Harrington. Grandmothers at Work: Juggling Families and Jobs. New York University Press. 2014. 978-0-8147-2947-2. 293 pp, \$24 (Paper)*

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## Book Review

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*Grandmothers at Work* fills what author Madonna Harrington Meyer identifies as a gap in research. Socio-economic shifts following the Great Recession have contributed to an increase the numbers of an invisible population, and Harrington Meyer aims a laser beam at the people who comprise it: women who work outside the home and also care for their grandchildren.

Intended for students, scholars, and policy advocates, the book first presents an overview of its themes—balancing paid and unpaid labor, the joys and intensification of grandmothership—before devoting separate chapters to the phenomenon’s specific consequences. In preparation, Harrington Meyer conducted one-hour interviews with 48 women, and balances their personal testimonies with data from the 2010 Health and Retirement Survey (HRS). The ways in which the informants navigate gendered expectations, familial duty, personal care, financial burdens, and professional aspirations are as varied as their backgrounds, and Harrington Meyer does an admirable job of contextualizing their lived experiences in a broader social context.

Harrington Meyer employs several lenses in her analysis, including a lifecourse perspective and gender theory. She attributes the intensification of grandmothership to economic necessity, “changing cultural expectations about parenting, the rising rates of working, and single, mothers, and rising childhood disability rates,” all of which “generate a growing need for assistance raising the kids” (p. 63). Pointing out that “where state supports are more extensive, grandparents provide less care,” Harrington Meyer argues throughout the book that what grandmothers—and society—need are policies and state-sponsored programs that support women’s presence in the paid workforce (p. 13).

Harrington Meyer’s analysis of the HRS revealed that 46% of working grandmothers “are providing at least some hours of grandchild care” (p. 2). This, coupled with longer life-spans, results in a “sandwich generation” with more layers than AARP-driven discourse suggests. Among Harrington Meyer’s informants, 38% were not only caring for their grandchildren, but were “also caring for a frail older relative” (p. 163). Although women are twice as likely as men to perform unpaid carework [*author’s term*] and the informants bear this statistic out, these women have internalized the cultural expectation that carework is a female province (p.20). “Few mentioned the need for government programs that would support working families,” indicating one reason public policy has not yet responded to changing socio-economic realities (p. 229).

Overall, the book is short on analysis and long on reiteration. Because of the way it is structured—considering each effect in turn—readers are treated to a cyclical groundhog day of minor epiphanies. Harrington Meyer routinely rephrases her informants’ quotes, and by the fifth time Harrington Meyer (re)introduces Renee, age X, mother of Y, grandmother of Z, the reader begins to wonder if the book will ever break free of its starting gate. Several chapters cover overlapping themes, creating the churning sense of perpetual rehashing. A more integrated structure may have better served the subject matter.

The book shines when discussing its policy implications. As she argues throughout, current public policy runs a risk of further exacerbating inequality across all measures. Disadvantaged populations are largely left out of employer-based benefits, which “are generally shrinking” even for those lucky enough to have them (p. 236). Harrington Meyer sees the problem as one both of policy and of culture, as “we have yet to meaningfully redefine supports for working families as a family, and not a women’s, issue” (p. 237).

Persistent gender norms mean that women tend to “absorb the financial, emotional, social, and physical costs of providing carework,” which impacts the socio-economic fabric of the country (p. 20).

Less overt attention is paid to suggestions for further research. But by illuminating a distinct stage of some women’s life cycle, Meyer creates an opportunity for other scholars to delve deeper into the complex personal and social effects of managing multiple, conflicting roles. As might be expected in an initial examination of a newly identified group, many of the effects on working grandmothers are mixed and tend to be more positive for women with greater resources.

With *Grandmothers at Work*, Harrington Meyer provides what could become a seminal text in sociology, gender studies, and gerontology. The book implicitly argues that grandmothering while participating in the paid labor force should be considered a distinct life stage. Harrington Meyer’s research provides compelling evidence that this emerging life stage is representative of a growing number of women’s lived experience and is entangled in many socio-economic shifts that have profound implications for individuals, families, and American society.