

Working mothers earn praise

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When one of our colleagues (whom we'll call Janet) recently had to turn down her mother's request to be taken shopping, suggesting that a taxi could do the job instead, her mother retorted that she had never asked her mother to take a taxi. Janet pointed out, "Mom, when Grandma was your age, you didn't have two young children and a full-time job!" Her mother's response: "Hmmp! I planned things better!"

Whether we agree with Janet or her mother, the reality is that times have changed. In 1960, 27.6 percent of mothers were in the paid labor force. Today, approximately 71 percent of mothers work, and 73 percent of those employed mothers work full-time. Even among mothers of children under 6, the labor force participation rate is approximately 64 percent. Clearly, most mothers today are taking on responsibilities for both parenting and breadwinning (and, often, care of elderly parents as well).

Two important forces have pushed mothers into the workplace. On the one hand, many of the current generation of mothers are taking advantage of the dramatic shifts in gender attitudes that have taken place since the 1960s to pursue interests and achievements that would not have been open to them in an earlier era. Women are now more likely than men to attain a college degree, and they are pursuing graduate and professional degrees at ever-increasing rates.

Women's progress up the corporate ladder has been slower, but they now have a noticeable presence among positions of power and responsibility in both the private and public sectors. For example, 12 Fortune 500 companies are currently led by female CEOs, and 91 seats in the U.S. Congress are held by women. Many women, like their male counterparts, have seen no reason why they should have to choose between the satisfactions of work or family.

Economic necessity

On the other hand, many mothers have been compelled to work by economic necessity, regardless of their personal preferences. When adjusted for inflation, workers' average hourly earnings have been declining since the 1970s. Moreover, the wage decline has been particularly steep for men, as the high-paying factory or middle-management jobs they once held have been eliminated, replaced by technology, or shipped overseas. The days when most men could support an entire family comfortably on one income are gone.

Despite their increasing numbers, working mothers still face significant challenges. The most obvious of these is relentless time pressure. Although fathers' contributions at home have been slowly increasing, mothers continue to bear the greater burden of housework and child care. A recent study by sociologist Liana Sayer and colleagues shows that among dual-earner couples with school-age children, mothers perform 29 hours of housework and child care per week, on average, compared to fathers' average of 20 hours per week. Among dual-earner couples with pre-school children, the gap is even wider, with mothers performing 37 hours of housework and child care per week, and fathers only 23 hours per week.

Despite the challenges, working moms seem to be here to stay. This Mother's Day, let's celebrate working mothers' efforts and achievements. Maybe they didn't plan things so badly after all.

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