

# Should women work?

*No matter their class, women who work are the targets of a huge guilt industry.*

By Deborah Stone

**Y**ou'd think that questions about the propriety of women working would have been settled by now — by the sheer overwhelming numbers of working women, if nothing else.

But the truth is, American women are still being raked over the cultural coals for going to work. Work still is seen as undermining their moral obligation to nurture a family.

"In an ideal world," Penelope Leach has written, "no woman would ever have a baby unless she really knew that she wanted to spend two or three years being somebody else's other half." Leach and the other two gurus of American child-rearing, T. Barry Brazelton and Benjamin Spock, are of a single mind on this: A woman who works while her children are young is sabotaging their healthy development.

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While these experts do make stabs at accommodating women who need to work (though not those who just want to work), their main advice is, as Brazelton says, that women "see mothering as a goal that is as important as anything they can achieve in their professional lives."

The recommended interruption of a woman's career — a couple of years at home with each child — is hardly trivial. When these experts assert the priority of motherhood over job, they are simply (and without even mentioning it) assigning women different life possibilities than men.

It's advice that may seem slightly archaic in 1998. Nonetheless, the books by Spock, Brazelton and Leach are top-selling child-rearing manuals, and they have created a reservoir of guilt even among today's women. Just glance through *Parents, Working Mother* or *Redbook* to see how much effort they devote to helping women cope with that guilt.

Middle- and upper-income women are told that they are morally stunted if they cannot turn off their career interests and aspirations while their children are young. By contrast, new welfare rules tell low-income women to park their kids in day care and go to work. These women are deemed irresponsible and not entitled to public aid just for taking care of their kids, but when they work, they can't possibly be the full-time, by-the-book, meet-your-child's-every-need mothers that the culture reveres.

That ideal may be based on dubious science, but the tensions are absolutely real. Nowadays, most women have to work out of economic necessity, if not as the sole or primary breadwinner, at least to keep up their standard of living in an economy of declining real wages. Yet all the worries about the effects on their children haven't changed the workplace much at all.

The organization of work in America is still deeply hostile to family life and responsibilities. Inflexible work schedules make it difficult for parents to respond to kids' unscheduled needs, such as sickness or emotional crises. Overtime, travel, irregular hours, night shifts, sudden shift changes and just too much work: The good worker balks at none of these things. And all wreak havoc on child-care arrangements, not to mention parent-child relationships.

The vise of cultural contradictions squeezes low-income women especially hard. Low-income mothers worry all the time about their kids' exposure to gangs and drugs, about the temptation to sell drugs to afford the things they covet, the temptation to skip school, the risks of pregnancy, the dangers of the streets. And the best way, sometimes the only affordable way, to keep their kids out of these kinds of trouble is to stay home with them — a need impossible to reconcile with the imperative to be a disciplined worker and a good provider.

Plainly we need a workplace culture that doesn't eat away at families. Equally, we need to recognize that parenting is valuable and should be rewarded and supported. Most women want to be good mothers and good workers. But so far, we have failed to come up with either the workplace policies or the safety net policies that would help women resolve the culture's conflicting moral codes, each by her own moral lights.

Deborah Stone is a visiting professor at the Radcliffe Public Policy Institute.



KEVIN KRENECK

## Women and work

The working woman still arouses mixed emotions, in herself and in society.

Of late she has become a debating point in the so-called culture wars. It's a topic to which this page will return from time to time.

Today a professor of public policy and a Christian conservative give their views. Tomorrow, a domestic relations lawyer ponders women, sex and the workplace.

— John Timpane,  
Commentary Page editor

## LETTERS

# Different replies

Nowhere in the article "Should women work?" does it suggest that men have a responsibility to give their children "the best start" (Inquirer, March 11). Why must women bear the double burden of work and children alone? The costs of taking time off are the same for either sex. Why should only women be the assumed recipient of this career "hit"?

Not including men in this parenting equation also does a disservice to those men who have taken parenting seriously enough to sidetrack their careers in order to care for their kids. These men are not only expanding the definition of manhood to include something other than "breadwinner," they are also enabling the mother of their children to expand her identity beyond simply "mother." There is no evidence that men are somehow inherently incapable of nurturing small children. Granted, the learning curve will be steeper for some, but part of our human "advantage" is the ability to learn new behaviors.

This debate should be titled "Should both parents work?" Until we start to make it socially acceptable for men to become primary caregivers, this will only be a career issue for women. Women will continue to short-circuit their careers or choose the traditional female occupations that provide flexibility. Either choice leaves women with no economic or political power. Consequently, the issues of long-term maternity leave and tax credits will never make it to the top of the agenda in the board rooms and legislatures of America.

**Candace Bell**  
Mount Laurel

Deborah Stone presented an interesting problem for women and would-be mothers with career aspirations (Inquirer, March 11). But she missed the main point: Women who have children must devote themselves entirely to that newborn. Careers and social status automatically become secondary. If a woman cannot accept those terms, she should not bring a child into this world.

**Domenic DiPilla**  
Philadelphia

Dickens was on poverty

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