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# NEWS

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## Working Moms Still Face Double Standard

By Deborah Stone

You'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 is still 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.

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

The routine interruption of a woman's career that's being recommended — 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 1997. 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.

In contrast to the advice for middle- and upper-income women, who are told that they are morally stunted if they cannot turn off their career interests and aspirations while their children are young, new welfare rules tell low-income women to park their kids in daycare 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 be able 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 unscheduled needs of kids like 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 of them wreak havoc on child care arrangements, not to mention parent-child relationships.

The vice 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 seductiveness of selling drugs as a way to afford the things they covet, the temptation to skip school, the possibilities of getting pregnant, the physical 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 to resolve the culture's conflicting moral codes, each by her own moral lights.

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