

Working Moms Heading Home? Not Likely

By Kathleen Gerson

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As holidays, hearth, and home take center stage and working mothers try to fit gift wrapping and card sending into their already-crowded schedules, the media start their annual claim that the new generation of women is turning away from careers to care for their families. As *The New York Times Magazine* put it in a recent cover story, women are “abandoning the climb and heading home.”

Whether they focus on a particularly well known woman or people like your friends, the story lines are the same: Disillusioned women are walking away from the workplace, and the more high-powered the job, the faster women are bailing out.

Whenever such stories break, researchers at the Council on Contemporary Families receive anguished e-mails from women who want to know if everyone really agrees that women should not seek gratifying, rewarding work if they want to have a family. We hear from busy moms who can't and don't want to quit their jobs, but worry that their kids will suffer. Young women about to graduate from college write us wondering if their hopes for balancing job and family are unattainable. "What is the real story?" they ask.

The real story is that having a satisfying job or career does not mean sacrificing a chance at family life. Over the last 30 years, reversing previous historical trends, highly educated, well employed women have become more likely to marry and have a child than their counterparts with fewer educational credentials, even though they tend to start families later.

And once women are mothers, they are not abandoning their jobs and careers. Mothers from all backgrounds are in the workforce to stay. Most of them need to be, and most of them want to be. In 2000, 60 percent of all married couples had two earners, while only 26 percent depended solely on a husband's paycheck, down from 51 percent in 1970.

Educated women are especially likely to work. A 2001 Census survey reports that among all mothers with children under six, 68 percent of women with college degrees and 75 percent of those with post-graduate degrees are in the labor force, compared with 65 percent of women with high school diplomas. Professional women, like professional men, are also putting in longer days at the office. Indeed, 20 percent of college-educated women workers, along with 39 percent of college-educated men, work at least fifty hours a week. Not all of them like those long hours, but neither do most of their male co-workers.

A recent Census report that employment had declined among mothers with infants received widespread attention. But a closer look reveals a different trend. The proportion of employed mothers aged 15 to 44 with children under the age of one declined from a peak of 59 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2002. That figure, however, remains vastly larger than the 31 percent who were in the labor force in 1976. And the slight dip may reflect the fact that women have made some modest gains, such as the right to take a parental leave when a child is born.

The same report found that mothers with children older than one look just like other women in the same age group, with 72 percent of mothers and 71 percent of childless women either holding a job or looking for one. Most mothers either remain at the workplace or return to it not long after their children are born. Over the long run, contemporary mothers, like fathers, are committed to forging lifetime ties to work.

Stories that say women are abandoning jobs and careers for families not only get the facts wrong; they also leave men entirely out of the picture. The more important and more accurate story is that neither women nor men want to be forced into an either-or choice. Both women and men want satisfying work and commitment to their families.

In our study of how Americans are juggling work and family time, Jerry A. Jacobs and I found that nine out of ten women who work fifty hours or more a week say they would prefer to work less. But so do eight out of ten men. Most workers – men as well as women – would like to work between 30 and 40 hours a week so that they can use the rest of their time for family, friends, and themselves. This includes many workers who cannot get as much work as they want or need, as well as those who would like to trim their excessively long workweeks. Women and men both want more flexible work schedules and other family-supportive options, and they want to be sure that when they use such so-called "family-friendly" policies, they will not be penalized by employers, as studies show occurs so often today.

As a society, we owe the women – and men – confronting work-family dilemmas something far better than the misleading and worry-inducing message that women no longer "want it all" after all. It's time America caught up with the 21st century and made the workplace family-friendly for everyone.