

The return of the stay-at-home mother ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

EACH suburban housewife, wrote Betty Friedan in 1963, struggles with a single question as she makes the beds, shops for groceries, chauffeurs children about and lies beside her husband at night: "Is this all?" A few years after her ground-breaking book "The Feminine Mystique" was published, the Census Bureau began collecting data on the proportion of mothers who opt to stay at home. Over the subsequent decades the statistics answered Friedan's question with a heartfelt no.

In 1967 the share of mothers who did not work outside the home stood at 49%; by the turn of the millennium it had dropped to just 23% (see chart 1). Many thought this number would continue to fall as women sought to "have it all". Instead, the proportion of stay-at-home mothers has been rising steadily for the past 15 years, according to new data crunched by the Pew Research Centre.

This partly reflects demographic change. Immigrants, a rising share of the relevant generation, are more likely to be stay-at-home mums than women born in America. There is an economic component to the change, too: at the end of the 1990s, when mothers staying at home were at their rarest, the economy was creating so many jobs that most people who wanted work could find it. Now more report that they are unable to do so, or are studying in the hope of finding work later. But there is also an element of choice: a quarter of stay-at-home mothers have college degrees.

Taken as a whole, the group includes mothers at both ends of the social scale (see chart 2). Some are highly educated bankers' wives who choose not to work because they don't need the money and would rather spend their time hot-housing their toddlers so that they may one day get into Harvard. Others are poorer but calculate that, after paying for child care, the money they make sweeping floors or serving burgers does not justify the time away from their little ones.

The first group is fairly small. Pew estimates that there are 370,000 highly educated and affluent stay-at-home mothers (defined as married mothers with children under 18 who have at least a master's degree and family income in excess of \$75,000). That is 5% of all stay-at-home mothers with working husbands. One-third of stay-at-home mothers are single or cohabiting, and on average they are poorer than the rest.

The increase in stay-at-home mothering sits oddly with a second big trend affecting women's lives: their relative success in the labour market. Women now hold half of the jobs in America, up from 32% in 1964. Women lost just one job during the recession for every 2.6 jobs lost by men, according to the Bureau of Labour Statistics (though men have since staged a recovery). At the highly skilled end of the jobs market, women are in a strong position: they earn 57% of all bachelor's degrees awarded by universities. The same is true in the low-skilled bit. The industries where the government expects the most employment growth between now and 2022, such as health care and hospitality, are mostly dominated by women. Unless men become more like women, the argument goes, changes in the structure of the economy will consign many of them to futures as indolent sperm donors.

How can women be taking over the workplace while simultaneously opting out of it? The answer is that men have been quitting the labour force even faster. Overall labour-force participation (for both sexes) has been declining since 2000, but for men it has fallen faster (from 75% to 69%) than for women (60% to 57%). In 40% of households with children a woman is now the primary breadwinner, though in most of those cases (26% of the total) that is because she is the only one.

Where women continue to lag is in their earnings relative to men. "The average full-time working woman earns just 77 cents for every dollar a man earns," said Barack Obama on April 8th, adding: "That's an embarrassment. It is wrong." As he signed a pair of executive orders that would compel federal contractors to provide data on the pay and sex of their workforce, he tut-tutted: "Equal pay for equal work. It's not that complicated."

Actually, it is a bit more complicated than Mr Obama pretends. If employers could really get the same work done for 77 cents on the dollar by hiring women, they would do so, and their shareholders would gleefully pocket the extra profits. The 77 cents statistic, which Mr Obama cites often, compares apples with oranges.

The nonsense of "77 cents"

Men in "full-time" work do indeed make more than women, but this is partly because they work longer hours (full-time here means 35 or more hours a week). Men also cluster in some of the better-paid professions: they are 87% of engineers but only 16% of teachers. They do more dangerous jobs: 92% of work-related deaths are of men. Most important, men are far less likely than women to take hefty career breaks when children arrive. Single, childless women earn 95 cents for every dollar a single, childless man makes, which is hardly the stuff of campaign slogans.

However, as the mid-terms loom, Democrats are anxious to turn out female voters, 55% of whom voted for Mr Obama in 2012. Waxing indignant about sexism may help rally support for Democratic candidates. But will it help women struggling to juggle the demands of work and family?

Policies that make it easier for women to stay in work after having children, should they choose to do so, would probably be more constructive. America is unusual in not granting statutory paid maternity (or paternity) leave or providing much affordable child care. Both policies were recommended by a commission headed by Eleanor Roosevelt shortly before "The Feminine Mystique" was published, but have been largely ignored.

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Region: United States [3]

Tags: economics [4]

work/life balance [5]

women's work [6]

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