

Hillary Clinton knows: the real face of low labor force participation is female ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When we think about stay-at-home moms, the most common image is one of cheerful suburban women shuttling kids off to soccer games and packing bag lunches: women who choose to be at home instead of at work. But the truth is far thornier, with many women at home not because they want to be, but because they have to be – something to which Hillary Clinton seemed attuned as she called for more women in the workforce on Monday as part of her economic vision for the future.

Clinton has been pushing left on work-life issues, so it was no surprise that she cited family leave, closing the wage gap and access to affordable, quality childcare as key to a building a stronger economy and narrowing gender inequalities. But Clinton also said she wants more women working in the public sphere, saying: “we can’t afford to leave talent on the sidelines.”

She continued: “The United States used to rank seventh out of 24 advanced countries in women’s labor force participation. By 2013, we’d dropped to 19th. That represents a lot of unused potential for our economy and American families.”

To prioritize putting more women in the workforce shouldn’t be controversial. But in a culture that still tells women that the most important job title they’ll ever hold is “mother” – and with Republicans at the ready to skewer anyone who hints at anything but pure reverence for women who stay at home – Clinton’s message is actually quite subversive. By plainly saying that she wants more women at work, the presidential hopeful is taking on the American fantasy that the majority of stay-at-home moms are there by choice.

While some moms who stay home to take care of children may label this decision as a choice, we can’t really call it such when the alternative may be spending an exorbitant amount of money on childcare. The long-held notion that stay-at-home moms are highly educated women who simply “opted out” of high-powered and well-paid careers is largely a myth.

According to a 2014 Pew study, a third of stay-at-home moms live in poverty, and 70% of single stay-at-home moms live below the poverty level. And nearly half of women who stay at home with children have a high school diploma or less. As Bryce Covert wrote last year: “these financial hardships and barriers are likely part of why a growing share of stay-at-home mothers are out of the workforce because they can’t find a job.” (Why it’s always women’s salaries that are considered expendable for the family good is a whole different story.)

It’s not just mothers who are out of work, of course. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, while the labor participation rate of men over 20 years old is about 72%, it’s only 58% for women. The face of unemployed Americans is a distinctly female one.

In her speech, Clinton said: “We should be making it easier for Americans to be both good workers and good parents and caregivers.” Part of doing that is, as Clinton laid out, ensuring equal pay, fair family leave and affordable childcare. But it’s also dismantling the myth that women would largely rather be at home than at work. Yes, we love our children. And many of us moms do want more flexibility and family leave. But we also want to get paid, and we want real choices.

Women are a necessary and vital part of the workforce whose contribution to the public good goes beyond raising children. And as Clinton said, these are not just “women’s issues.” They’re American ones.

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