

Hard Choice for Moms: Work or Stay Home?



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You've got a new baby and a mortgage to pay for, so should you go back to work or stay home to raise Junior? In a change in trend, more women are considering the stay-at-home option.

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Mothers with the financial means have long had the choice to go back to work or stay home after the birth of their children. Today, however, more moms in all economic levels appear to be considering the stay home option - at least that's what some experts suspect when they point to recent population surveys, which show all female employment numbers declining after decades of sustained growth.

"The employment decline is apparent among all income groups, roughly equally," says **Philip Cohen**, PhD, associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Employment figures for married mothers with children under age 6 have dropped 7% to 10% since the peak years of 1997 to 2000, depending on the income group, says Cohen. Overall, the work participation rate for all women dropped 1.5% from 2000 to 2004, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

This is significant because, for four decades, women's labor participation rates consistently climbed, from 40.8% in 1970 to 57.5% in 2000. The phenomenon caused profound changes in American family, culture, and economy. The shift in direction has some people wondering whether or not the sexual revolution at work is over and what may have caused the change.

The 'Stay-at-Home' Buzz

In a 2005 study, the U.S. Census Bureau reported an estimated 5.6 million stay-at-home moms. That is a 22% increase from 1994.

"It used to be more popular and widely accepted for moms to work," says Cara Gardenswartz, PhD, a clinical psychologist in independent practice in Beverly Hills, Calif. "There's been a backlash, because right now, there's actually more status to not be a working mom."

Melissa Milkie, PhD, associate professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park, believes that many factors such as family demands, number of kids, age of the youngest child, and time constraints prevent many of today's mothers from entering or staying in the workforce even if they want to remain on the job.

On the other hand, Sylvia Allegretto, an economist for the Economic Policy Institute, says the recent dip in

women's employment has more to do with the country's prolonged recovery from recession than with a change in women's work patterns. She points out that labor participation rates have decreased for men as well.

Men's employment rates have declined 2.7% from 2000-2004, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Allegretto may have a point about the recession, says Cohen, but he's still not ruling out the possibility that women's work patterns have changed.

"There's never been a sustained decline in mothers' employment until the last 5 years," he says, noting that women's employment rates have survived other recessions. "It may be a testament to this recession, or a testament to the squeeze on women to stay home."

Time will tell what has caused a decline in women's labor participation. Until then, it appears that the dilemma of whether to stay at home, go back to work full time, or somewhere in between is a hot topic.

If the release of books is any indication of the issue's popularity, in the last decade, dozens of books have been written on the subject of working and stay-at-home moms. In the last year alone, at least six new titles on the subject have been published:

- *Comeback Moms: How to Leave Work, Raise Children, and Jumpstart Your Career Even if You Haven't Had a Job in Years* by Monica Samuels, and J.C. Conklin (Broadway Books, 2006)
- *Domestically Challenged: A Working Mom's Survival Guide to Becoming a Stay-at-home Mom* by Alana Morales (Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing, 2006)
- *To Hell with All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* by Caitlin Flanagan (Little, Brown & Company, 2006)
- *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families* by Leslie Morgan Steiner (Random House, 2006)
- *The Momstown Guide to Getting it All: A Life Makeover for Stay-at-Home Moms* by Mary Goulet and Heather Reider (Hyperion, 2005)
- *How She Really Does It: Secrets of Successful Stay-at-Work Moms* by Wendy Sachs (Da Capo Press, 2005).

To help mothers decide what is best for them and their families, WebMD consulted with psychologists, sociologists, and authors. The experts share ideas on what to consider in determining career and family choices, and provide insight on how to live with your selection.

How to Choose Between Home and Work

If you're a mother trying to decide whether to stay home, work full time, or work part time, here are six things to consider:

Money. Your family's financial picture is obviously important as basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, and health care costs need to be covered. Beyond the essentials, household needs vary, and it is up to you and your family to decide whether staying at home, working part time, or working full time will work best. If you decide to stay home, consider what the loss of income will mean for the family and for your own spending. Make sure to discuss this with your significant other, and if you both need help, consult with a financial planner, advises Karen S. Yasgoor, PhD, an organizational psychologist in private practice in La Jolla, Calif., and owner of the Center for Work Life Assessment.

Personal preference. It is crucial to determine your own feelings about working and staying home, because it can make a difference in your child's life. Experts say a mother's level of fulfillment and the quality (versus quantity) of time she spends with her child are the biggest components to his intellectual and emotional development and to his ability to succeed in the world. "If mom is a happier person, then she is going to have a more fulfilling and therefore healthier relationship with her kids," says Gardenswartz.

Your significant other. Your partner's support of your decision is critical; otherwise there could be many difficulties. If the person that you're living with is unsupportive, he or she may not help you with finances, child rearing, or household chores. Resentments could build up on both sides. If you and your significant other disagree over whether you should stay home or work, Yasgoor recommends a six-month trial period followed by an evaluation to see how one option works for the family. Also, whatever course of action you take, make sure to run by potential issues with your partner. If you decide to work, for example, it's important to figure out details such as how long maternity and paternity leave will be, who will pick up kids from day care or school, or who will care for them when they're sick, says Leslie Morgan Steiner, author of *Mommy Wars*.

Social network. Wherever you are, make sure you have a group of people who will support you. If you stay at home, look for other moms in the neighborhood who are dealing with the same issues. At work, connect with other mothers either informally, or through structured women's groups. "You need to be able to go out there and be able to socialize with like people," says Yasgoor. She says stay-at-home moms need to have adult interaction, and all moms can benefit from being around other women who face the same issues.

Career and Workplace. How family friendly your employer is can play a huge role in how difficult it will be to stay home or continue working. Even before you have a baby, look for a job that will be respectful of your family's values. "If your employer is not flexible of working parents ... then it's going to make working that much harder," says Morgan Steiner. If you decide to stay home, deter-

mine how likely it will be for you to return to your job or career. To help keep competitive while at home, Jacqueline Plumez, PhD, a psychologist and career counselor in Larchmont, N.Y., proposes keeping current in your profession by taking classes, working part time, or volunteering in projects related to your career. Yasgoor also recommends joining professional associations or attending networking events.

Culture. Expectations of mothers in families and society can make it difficult for women who have different ideas. If the family tradition involves staying at home to take care of children, for example, working moms may end up feeling guilty about leaving their kid(s) in day care. At the same time, a growing culture of intensive parenting - where the mother and child bond are emphasized - may pressure some women to stay home. All of the family and cultural demands can make a woman feel guilty and resentful. To shed negative feelings, Yasgoor advises tapping into and writing down your own needs, goals, and objectives. "Remember," she says, "if the mother isn't happy, no one is happy."

Living With Your Decision

Whether you choose to stay at home, work full time, or work or part time, keep in mind that there's no such thing as perfect motherhood.

"You can read 25 books by child care experts, and it's still not as valuable as getting in touch with what kind of mom you want to be and need to be to take care of your children," says Morgan Steiner.

You may end up making a choice that could prove to be difficult for the household. For instance, if you choose to stay home or work part time, finances could be stretched thin. In such cases, experts advise being strong within yourself, remembering why your choice is the best for you and your family. Then think about how you can cope with the situation.

On tight budgets, Morgan Steiner says families have sacrificed things like expensive extracurricular activities, camps, vacations, cars, and places to live. Some people choose to move to neighborhoods with good public schools so they don't have to pay for private education. Others forgo the iPods, Xboxes, Game Boys, and other popular gadgets. When you make your choice, remember to also be flexible.

"Motherhood - we don't have it figured out and then lock into it," says Morgan Steiner. "Every few months, everything changes, and you've got to just roll with it."

SOURCES: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: "Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years and over by sex, 1970-2004 annual averages." U.S. Census Bureau, CPS: "Parents and Children in Stay-at-Home Parent Family Groups: 1994 to present." The New York Times: "Stretched to Limit, Women Stall March to Work," March 2, 2006.