

A LINE ON LIFE

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(Mis)Fortunes of the Working Mother *

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Do having both family and work responsibilities help or hurt the health of a working mother? This was one of the questions asked at a conference on "Work, stress and health" in Washington D. C., last September 14-16.

There are two competing hypotheses concerning the working mother. One – the "**enhancement hypothesis**" – suggests more advantages for the working mother. She seems to gain self-esteem, to find intellectual stimulation from work, and to get social support for her multiple roles. This can outweigh negative factors.

The other – the "**scarcity hypothesis**" – infers that people have a limited amount of time and energy. With competing demands, working mothers suffer from overload. They also have trouble resolving their conflicting roles of worker, mother, and spouse (and sometimes student too).

Psychologist Nancy L. Marshall (Wellsley College's Center for Research on Women) reported on two studies related to these hypotheses. Her research seems to support both views. Marshall found that "*having children gives working mothers a mental and emotional boost that childless women lack.*" On the other hand, having children increases the woman's workload and strain on the family.

Experts agree that one reason for the increased workload is related to **traditional gender roles**. Women have moved into our work force. At the same time, they have maintained their traditional responsibility for the "**second shift**" – household work and childcare.

Psychologist Ulf Lundberg (University of Stockholm) developed a "*total workload scale*." With this scale, he found something that many women have known for a long time – women usually spend more time working at paid and unpaid tasks than men. Age and occupational level don't seem to affect the workload. However, having a child does. With no children involved, both men and women work about 60 hours per week. (Remember, this includes home chores too.)

According to Lundberg, "*As soon as there is a child in the family, total workload increases rapidly for women.*" With three or more children, women work about 90 hours per week. In contrast, men still spend only about 60 hours working. This means women typically can't relax and "*unwind*" on the evenings or weekends. Women's efforts are demanded both on the job and at home. However, once they get home, men are usually more able to relax.

When mothers work overtime, they experience more stress over the weekend than men. This is inferred from their epinephrine (adrenaline) levels. This was found – even though the fathers had worked *more* overtime on their jobs.

Gary W. Evans (Cornell University) agrees. He views stress as cumulative – it all adds up. Stresses at work and home combine to overload women and put them at risk. Just coping with multiple stresses takes its toll. Evans states, "*But when we cope with a stressor, especially one that is incessant or difficult to control, our ability to cope with subsequent environmental demands can be impaired.*"

***"Women need to feel that they have a real choice
when it comes to balancing work and family life."***

Many experts believe that the overload and conflict are caused by societal expectations. Psychologist Gunn Johansson (University of Stockholm) remarked, "*Society sends encouraging or discouraging signals about an individual's choices and about the feasibility of combining work and family.*" Johansson's studies compared women managers in Sweden with those in the former West Germany. In contrast to Germany, Sweden provides quality child care upon request. In Germany, most women managers did not have children. However, those in Sweden averaged about two children. German women realized that they had to forsake children to be able to work. In contrast, Swedish women felt they had a right to combine both.



Our government is taking some steps to provide childcare, especially for those at lower economic levels. However – as part of our society – we don't need to wait for the government to act.

Some larger businesses are providing flexible time schedules and childcare facilities to reduce stress among working mothers. (Even Arizona Western College has childcare available for parents who are students.) Unfortunately, the facilities are usually unable to keep up with the demand.

At home, spouses, relatives and friends can ease the stress of working mothers. They can take over aspects of both childcare and household chores. I must admit that – when I was younger – I had a more traditional view of gender roles. If she wanted, my wife could work – as long as the meals were prepared and the housework was finished.

After months of my wife trying to meet these overwhelming tasks, we had a "*discussion.*" She

helped me realize that I was teaching an egalitarian standard to my students, but following a traditional one at home. Since then, I have pitched in much more with the children and the housework. Even so, my wife still carried the greater load in this area. (My quality level in cleaning clothes or the house frequently does not match her standards. Now we can afford a cleaning lady.)

Working mothers can have the "*best of both worlds,*" but they need help to realize this goal. Well, what are you waiting for?

* Adapted from Rebecca A. Clay's "Working mothers: happy or haggard?," [*The APA Monitor*](#), November, 1996, pages 1, 37.