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TIME Magazine and the New Stay-at-Home Moms

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“The Case for Staying Home: Why More Young Moms are Opting out of the Rat Race,” is TIME’s cover story for its March 22, 2004 edition. If a picture is worth a 1000 words, TIME’s cover photo speaks volumes. The cover portrays a toddler holding on to his mom as she cradles his head with her hand. The boy’s adoring eyes look up to his mother’s face even as her steady hand secures him in her love and care. Even if the cover had run without an article, a potent message would have been sent.

Nevertheless, the cover article is itself a signal of significant change in how Americans view family and motherhood. Writer Claudia Wallis explains that many women are caught between the pressures of career and motherhood and, against the feminist tide, “more women are sticking with the kids.”

Wallis takes readers into the worlds of several families, showcasing highly educated professional women who have given up significant careers in order to spend at least several years at home with their children. She also interviewed women who remain in the workforce, but yearn for an opportunity to be stay at home moms with their children.

Cheryl Nevins has continued working as a lawyer with the Chicago Board of Education, even as she also devotes time to sons Ryan, 2 1/2, and Brendan, 11 months. Vera Orozco, the family’s nanny, takes care of the boys during her 10 1/2 hour shift at the Nevins’ home. All this is about to change, however, as Cheryl is now 8 months pregnant. She and her husband, Joe, have decided that she will leave her legal work when the third child arrives and will stay home with all three children during their younger years.

“It’s hard. I’m giving up a great job that pays well, and I have a lot of respect and authority,” she said. Even as the decision to stay home was difficult, “I know it’s the right thing.” Pam Pala of Salt Lake City, Utah, spent years driving her career as a construction project engineer with a large company. Yet, after the birth of her daughter 11 months ago, Pam decided to stay home to give her full time attention. Pala made this choice because she had been raised by a working mother and she wanted her daughter to have the attention she had missed. “I grew up in a divorced family,” Pala recalled. “My mom couldn’t take care of us because she had to work. We went to baby-sitters or stayed home alone and were scared and hid under the bathroom counter whenever the doorbell rang.” Wallace explains that a generational shift between the baby boomers and their children has much to do with this new trend. “While boomer women sought career opportunities that were unavailable to their mostly stay-at-home moms, Gen Xers were the latchkey kids and the children of divorce. Also, their careers have bumped along in a roller-coaster, boom-bust economy that may have shaken their faith in finding reliable satisfaction at work.”

That may certainly be part of the answer, but something deeper seems also to be at work. Many of these mothers want to devote themselves to the raising of their children. They do not want to miss the irreplaceable joys of motherhood. Work and professional satisfaction may have been their primary concern at some point, but the arrival of children refocuses priorities and raises the largest questions about meaning in life.

The reality is that few women can meet the parallel demands of work and home without significant stress and frustration. Inevitably, something has to give—and evidence mounts that it is the children who are most affected.

This is especially true as more and more women enter professional ranks. Even though the US work week averages only around 34 hours in the manufacturing sector, those who serve as top executives are expected to work at least 60 to 70 hours per week. As Arlie Hochschild explains, “We are now the workaholic capital of the world, surpassing the Japanese.”

Many of those featured in the TIME article intend to return to the workplace as soon as their children are older. As Wallis explains, their mantra is: “You can have it all, just not all at the same time.” She goes on to explain, “Their behavior, contrary to some popular reports, is not a June Cleaver-ish embrace of the old-fashioned motherhood but a new, nonlinear approach to building a career and an insistence on restoring some kind of sanity.”

Hochschild, author of *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*, explains that many women are now leaving an 80-hour-a-week job because they see the toll it is taking on their families. “They are committed to work, but many watched their mothers and fathers be ground up by very long hours, and they would like to give their own children more than they got. They want a work-family balance.”

According to Catalyst, a consulting group that specializes in research on women in business, 22 percent of women who hold graduate or professional degrees are now at home with their children. This includes one in three women with M.B.A.'s who are not working full-time.

Catalyst also reported that Gen Xers “didn’t want to have to make the kind of trade-offs the previous generation made. They’re rejecting the stresses and sacrifices.” Among Gen Xers, both men and women now rank personal and family goals ahead of career goals—a fact which sets them apart from their baby boomer parents.

Of course, not all are pleased with this trend. Fay Clayton, a partner in a Chicago law firm, laments the loss of younger women to the legal profession as many leave full-time legal work for motherhood. “I fear there is a generational split,” she commented, “and possibly a step backwards for younger women.”

The TIME cover story also includes predictable warnings about the long-range impact of this trend. Does this mean that women will pull back from professions such as law, finance, and medicine? Will these women face difficulties as they try to return to the workplace and their professions in future years? Is it fair for these women to lose all professional standing and promotion during the years they were at home with their children?

These questions defy easy prediction and safe answers. The workplace will adjust to this new reality, and talent is always a rare commodity. Most significantly, these women were willing to sacrifice professional advancement for the sake of motherhood—and they’re not ashamed of it, either.

The most important impact of TIME’s article is the attention it directs to the importance of motherhood itself. The magazine was careful to distance its cover story from the idealized portrait of the suburban wife it had featured in its June 20, 1960 cover story. In that edition, the suburban housewife was featured on the cover. “With children on her mind and under her foot,” the article explained, “she is breakfast getter, laundress, house cleaner, dishwasher, shopper, gardener, encyclopedia, arbitrator of children’s disputes, policeman.” That article went on to relate, “If she is not pregnant, she wonders if she is. She takes her peanut-butter sandwich lunch while standing, thinks she looks a fright, watches her weight (periodically), jabbars over the short distance telephone with the next-door neighbor...Spotted through her day are blessed moments of relief or dark thoughts of escape.”

Those “dark thoughts of escape” were painted in darkest hues by feminists theorists in the 1960s such as Betty Friedan, who described the suburban home as a “domestic prison” which held millions of promising women hostage to the needs of their children.

Even with concessions to the politically correct age, TIME’s current cover story is the equivalent of a time bomb among the cultural elite. When TIME magazine devotes a cover to “the case for staying home,” we can be sure the magazine is on to something.

Motherhood must be the world's most precious profession, and hard evidence proves that stay-at-home moms offer children the maximum care and security needed in their youngest years. Many mothers are extending this stay-at-home pattern throughout their children's school years, determined to avoid the "latchkey" phenomenon so many of these mothers experienced as children themselves.

The secular world may never value motherhood with the honor and value it deserves, but Christians surely understand that God gave us something invaluable in granting women the opportunity to be mothers. The hand that rocks the cradle does indeed determine the future of the world. A slander against motherhood is an assault on the dignity of life itself.

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