

### Chapter 3: The Devaluation of Women's Work

This chapter draws on work from Ann Crittenden's 2001 book, *The Price of Motherhood*, and on an article ("Do Wives Own Half? Winning for Wives after Wendt," 2000) and book (*Unbending Gender*, 2000) by Joan Williams that explain the devaluation of the unpaid work of raising children and taking care of daily chores, and the importance of this devaluation for understanding why women are marginalized with respect to jobs in the paid workforce and claims against their ex-husbands if their marriage end in divorce. It also contains a reading by Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser ("A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the US Welfare State," 1994) about dependent welfare mothers that traces the notion of independence and dependency in American history and political thought. While middle class housewives are not pathologized the same way that welfare mothers are, there are some interesting insights here about the centrality of independence to full citizenship.

Beginning then with Ann Crittenden, who discusses the move to equate work to *paid* work:

"Work" or "labor" became synonymous with cash income and with "men's" work. The stage was set for the assumption – still with us – that men "supported" their wives at home, as if unpaid work were not productive and not part of the "real" economy. ... Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out that under the new political and economic system that was emerging, "Either women can become [like] men, and so full citizens; or they continue at women's work, which is of no value for citizenship.

As women's family labor lost status as "work," it was increasingly sentimentalized as a "labor of love." Feminist economist Nancy Folbre put it neatly: "The moral elevation of the home was accompanied by the economic devaluation of the work performed there." In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the frugal, hardworking colonial wife was slowly replaced in popular mythology by the "angel of the hearth," a moral exemplar who tended to the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of her brood, leaving the material aspects of life to her husband." ... [In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a] women's duty to her offspring took a distant second to her obligations to her husband, the rooster who ruled in every roost. All of this gradually changed, until the mid-nineteenth century American women in many states had won the right to share joint custody of their children (Crittenden, 2001, 47-48).

Crittenden argues that a woman's duties to her husband gradually changed as the United States transformed from being an agrarian society to an industrial one, and intensive maternal care which creates independent, self-disciplined adults became a crucial contribution to the economy.

[Countries with dynamic capitalist economies] required a new approach to child-rearing. In a static, agrarian economy people cannot, and need not, make huge investments of time or emotion in their children. Early in life, with little or no schooling, children are able to become valuable economic assets, who work in the fields and the kitchen, tend the babies, care for the animals, and help in the family enterprise.... But these practices provide poor preparation for success in a fluid and meritocratic society. It takes years of hard, patient work to mold infants into individuals who have the imagination to find a place for themselves in competitive, mobile world, the self-confidence to strive, and the self-discipline to plan for an uncertain future. (Crittenden, 2001, 49-50)

*Questions.*

1. Given the value added of intensive mothering, why do we do so little to recognize this crucial work? What *could* we do? For example, is there any difference between a latch-key kid and a child whose mother is there when he gets home from school? At what point should we consider having children take care of themselves for a few hours each afternoon before their parents arrive home negligence rather than independence?
2. If we think that relying on self-care is inappropriate for children under the age of twelve, should we work to develop affordable, good after school programs for children in primary school? Should we encourage parents to be home from 3:00 pm on? Should we require that employers give employees with young children flexible schedules, part time hours or telecommuting arrangements until their children are in junior high school?
3. How can parents with parental responsibilities - usually mothers - avoid being typed as less reliable or more troublesome by their employers than non-parents or parents who are not responsible for childrearing?

From early on, feminists in the United States have disagreed about the value of women's work in the home, as Crittenden notes:

Instead of demanding equal *value* be placed on women's work of child care and homemaking, many women's rights advocates began to challenge the traditional gender division of labor itself. American feminists began to describe work within the family as labor that women had to *escape*, if they were ever to achieve equality and freedom. They began to imagine two-career marriages and schemes for cooperative house-keeping that would free women to earn an income and relieve them from the drudgery of housework. In other words, they began to sound like contemporary feminists in their assumption that women could only avoid subservience and economic dependency by becoming wage earners.... At the turn of the twentieth century, the women's movement contained two contradictory strands: one that denigrated women's role within the family and one that demanded recognition and remuneration for it. The first argued that only one road could lead to female emancipation, and it pointed straight out of the house toward the world of paid work. The second sought equality for women within the family as well and challenged the idea that a wife and mother was inevitably an economic "dependent" of her husband (Crittenden, 2001, 58, 63).

With the advent of the industrial revolution and men's move from working at home on family farms or enterprises to working in factories, "work" came to be defined as work that is done for pay, and work that was not paid was not recognized as work. At the same time, the ideology of separate spheres emerged, with the home representing a haven in the heartless world of arm's length capitalist relationships. Women (middle class ones anyway) represented a world of nurture, gentleness and respite. But their work at home largely disappeared from sight:

...the great part of women's work does not figure. Nothing counts unless it is bought and sold. This produces absurd perversities: a nurse feeding formula to a baby counts as a productive activity, but a mother's breast-feeding doesn't; care for an aging relative in a nursing home counts, while at-home care by an unpaid family member doesn't; paying

bills and taxes and planning family investments counts when done by an accountant, but not when done by a spouse; charitable contributions of money are tax-deductible, but volunteer donations of time are not; teaching twenty children in a classroom counts, while home schooling one's own children doesn't (Crittenden, 2001, 66).

Like Crittenden, Joan Williams has argued that the disappearance of women's work as mothers and housewives figures strongly into the devaluation of their contributions to their families and to the larger society, which benefits from well-raised children who are able to perform as educated, disciplined workers when they grow up who contribute to society by working hard and paying taxes. Williams quotes one mother's response to the perennial party question, "do you work?":

I get so sick of people asking me, "Do you work?" Of course I work! I've got five children under ten--I work twenty-four hours a day! But of course that's not what it means when people say, "Do you work?" They mean do you work for pay, outside your home. Sometimes I hear myself say, "No, I don't work," and I think: "That's a complete lie! I work harder than anyone I know!" (quoted in Williams, 2000a, 259).

Like Crittenden, Williams connects the devaluation of women's work to the Industrial Revolution and the gender system of domesticity that arose along with it:

With the advent of domesticity, two different rationales emerged to justify men's ownership. The first recharacterized women's sewing, cooking, and childrearing as not "work" [so much] "as emanations of an abstract but shared Womanhood."... The second argument that emerged to justify husbands' continued ownership of wives' household work was the view that awarding women entitlements threatened the integrity of family life, by introducing market motivations into the "Home Sweet Home." A staple of domesticity was the notion that women, and their domestic sphere, should not be sullied by "that bank note world." The anxiety about commodification in the domestic sphere was a way of policing the boundary between home and work. ...

Both the erasure of household work and the theme of commodification anxiety present important challenges to lawyers representing wives in divorce cases. The erasure of household work creates the sense of mothers at home that the reason that they "own nothing" is that they "don't work."...

The erasure of household work also affects judges' attitudes towards alimony, as when one judge opposed alimony on the grounds that he did not believe in keeping women in "a perpetual state of secured indolence." Such "indolence," of course, typically involves full-time child care as well as cooking, laundry, decorating, entertaining, and other tasks that in market contexts are often highly paid and defined as work performed by caterers, decorators, etc....

An attorney representing the wife in a divorce case also needs to spend considerable time and energy addressing the argument that any decision that awards economic entitlements to the wife sullies the intimacy of family life--for any competent attorney representing the husband will try to use commodification anxiety to ridicule claims that twenty-seven years of love and devotion should have a price.

The key point ... is that awarding family property to the husband does not avoid commodifying it: the issue is not *whether* the property will be owned, but *who will own it*. *Someone* has to own family property: refusing to award it to the wife simply means that it will be a commodity solely owned by the husband. ... the issue is not *whether the family wage will be owned*, but *who will own it*. In addition, the issue is not *whether negotiations will take place*, but *whether those negotiations will be so one-sided that they will involve overreaching* by one of the parties. The effect of decisions that use commodification anxiety to justify awarding family assets to husbands is not to avoid strategic behavior but to strengthen the hand of the husband in on-going marital (and divorce) negotiations (Williams, 2000a, 258-61).

The argument that childrearing and other work done in the home is too precious to put a price tag on, work that comes from the heart and not because one expects a monetary reward informs women's own sense that they should be unbounded in their time and generosity for their children, and their guilt about hiring others to do such work, as Williams writes in her 2000 book, *Unbending Gender*:

the commodification anxiety derived from domesticity forms an unspoken, and often unconscious, cultural background for many mothers' sense that they should not have their children raised by "strangers," but instead should frame their own lives around care giving. The sentiment that mothers should have "all the time in the world to give" also reflects a second dynamic that stems from domesticity's separation of home and work: the erasure of household work. To sketch its contours it is useful to begin with the phrase "time to give."

Note that the issue is who will "give time," not who will do laundry, child care, dishes, shopping, and other household work. ... Before the nineteenth century, women's work was acknowledged as work owned by the husband, just as he owned the work of his children and servants. With the shift away from open hierarchy to the new imagery of men and women sovereign in their separate spheres, the fact that men still owned the right to their wives' services became a fact that needed to be explained. The solution... was the "pastoralization" of women's work, its depiction as the "effortless emanations of women's very being." ... the erasure of household work served to defuse the tension between the ideology of equality and the persistence of male entitlements originally described in the language of gender hierarchy (Williams, 2000b, 32-33).

Why does the devaluation of women's work in the home matter? Women who take responsibility for childrearing marginalize themselves economically: if they work, they work fewer hours and get paid less than workers who have no childrearing or domestic responsibilities. They bear the costs, in terms of pay raises, more responsible assignments, assessments of their reliability and contribution, of brief interruptions in their workforce attachment and not being available for long hours of overtime or trips and transfers to out-of-town locations. Because their domestic work is largely invisible and unpaid, they are in a difficult position to argue for compensation for work they have contributed to their families in the event their marriages end. On the work and family sides of women's disadvantage, Williams writes:

The pervasive marginalization of mothers stems from a clash between two social norms. The first is the norm of parental care, the widespread sense that children should be raised

by parents, not by strangers. The second is the ideal worker norm, which enshrines as ideal the worker who takes no time off for childbearing or child rearing and is available for work full-time and overtime. The ideal worker norm is designed around men's bodies, for they need not take time off for childbearing. It is also designed around men's life patterns in a society where women's still do 80% of the child care. [It is nearly impossible to fulfill both roles and this clash leads to significant differences in the wage gap.]

Women who can perform as ideal workers are on their way to reaching equality with men: single women without children earn about 95% of men's wages. Most mothers do not. In deference to the norm of parental care, most mothers of childbearing age remain off the "fast track" and on the "mommy track," either at home or in jobs where they work only part-time or part year or do traditional "women's work."

Consequently, mothers as a group earn only 60% of the wages of fathers. In fact, while the wage gap between men and women has been *falling*, the "family gap" between mothers and others has been *rising*. In an economy where men's bodies and life patterns still define our work ideals, mothers remain marginalized as a group.... The economy of mothers and others stems from our practice of providing for children's care by marginalizing their caregivers. This practice is the central tenet of the gender system historians have called domesticity, which arose during the Industrial Revolution, circa 1780.... In the contemporary version, the typical father is still viewed as the breadwinner and earns 70% of the family income, while the typical mother does most of the child care and also engages in economically marginalized part-time, volunteer, or "women's work" (Williams, 2000a, 254-5).

Another interesting approach to thinking about the repercussions of women's unpaid work is that taken by Linda Gordon and Nancy Fraser in "A Genealogy of Dependency," which discusses the centrality of independence to full citizenship and various notion of dependency, particularly the pathological dependency of the welfare-reliant mother that emerged in discourses about welfare benefits in the 1980s and 90s. Although they focus primarily on welfare policy, they see middle class housewives as dependent as well. (Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the US Welfare State," *Signs* 19(2): 276-303, 1994: PDF version is to be combined with the file version of this chapter).