

The Feminization of Poverty in the Workplace: The Myth of the “Mommy Track”

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Abstract. In today’s mass mediated world images of mothers and motherhood play an important, ever shifting, superficial role, in the production of images and products. Media depictions range from the crack mom to soccer mom, stay at home mom to celebrity mom, working mother to welfare mother. In the increasing drive to sell products, the variety of mothers does little to suppress our need to whitewash in some ways literally the notion of motherhood. If one does not follow the typical pattern then one is on the edges not being noticed or on the fringes being vilified.

An article in *Ms. Magazine* highlights a growing debate over the roles of mothers in our society titled the Mommy Wars by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2000). The article highlights media depictions of mothers in our society how celebrity mothers are celebrated and revered while welfare mothers are depicted as lazy, dishonest, and manipulating the system. In general Douglas and Michaels argue that “most” mothers cannot live up to these idealized depictions and those who challenge the vilified positions that they cast in are labeled as “complainers” and trying to get something for nothing. In these scenarios women’s struggles are divided so that that many working class women are angered by those on welfare rather than working together to improve things and are left with celebrity mothers to identify with which makes for a hard social movement.

Beyond the “mommy wars” and challenges between celebrity mothers and welfare mothers, working mothers and stay at home mothers, an underlying message of a prescriptions for appropriate types of mothering is being promoted. Little attention to the current Census Bureau’s 2004 report on poverty and the divide between rich and poor Americans is being noticed by these portrayals. Most women are not in the privileged class. This paper will 1) Review the term “mommy track” 2) Investigate the prescriptive component of the media in relation to mothering with attention to self-help and feminism 3) Argue that each of these prescriptions work only for a privileged few.

The “Mommy Track”

In 1989 the term “mommy track” was coined in response to an article published in the *Harvard Business Review* by Felice Schwartz. Schwartz argued that corporations should become prepared for female workers who may desire a different track than the standard one offered in most corporations. The tracks were standard: meant for males or single women or women with no children and a different track that would include career and family. She argued that on this “different” track some women would be willing to give up promotions to be able to spend more time at home. The term “mommy track” was later used to describe the track Schwartz proposed.

When this term was coined, feminists and women’s right’s groups around the country were outraged. The initial criticism or outrage toward the term and its implications focused on how women could “have it all.” Feminists argued that they could have a career and a family and still feel fulfilled. The description of most “mommy track” jobs focused on good, not great, jobs with benefits. Feminists found the implications to be condescending and potentially repressive. The track described by Schwartz did not offer much room for promotion, but did offer more flexibility. Issues such as flex time, on site daycares, and even legislation to extend unpaid time off are consistent with this tracking system.

The term “mommy track” may be a rationalization of oppression in the work place. As more and more women work outside the home a “material reality” is that more and more women and children are living in poverty.

The “Mommy Track” arose from good intentions to solve the perceived problem employers were facing with losing employees. Schwartz who wrote the article that promoted the “mommy track” is a self-proclaimed feminist. Within weeks of publishing the article she tried to recant her claims and argue that women need more opportunities not less. Instead of letting her publish her response to the “mommy tack” the editors defended her first article and touted Schwartz as an “expert in her field.” This “expert” was not given the opportunity to defend her own article or explain it further. The editors took that job. (Faludi,

1991) The actual “tracking” system only serves to discriminate against women. It glosses over the material reality most working mothers face. Most employment women face is low paying, does not provide child care, and could not stand for anymore “flexibility”= working at night. The “Mommy Track” is a reincarnation of the American dream some have discounted it outright others have embraced it.

Results of these Attempts to Address the Issue

- 1) The traditionally “private sphere” of the home has been invaded by a “second shift” or “third shift”
- 2) Women earn only two-thirds of what men earn for similar work
- 3) The “mommy track” is a euphemism for discrimination in the workplace
- 4) Stark reality our economy relies on low wages of women as men’s wages are reduced.
- 5) Few families can support children on one paycheck without living below the poverty line
- 6) Minimum wage does not mean living above the poverty line
- 7) Single-Mother households are much more likely to live in poverty- 41%

Social, Cultural, Political Context of the Problem

As more and more women are in the workplace, women have absorbed the strain of poverty. Women are absorbing the brunt of poverty and also being perceived as “choosing” their path. The following illustrate some of the arguments women face when “choosing” a path whether it be work, welfare, or poverty. All of the paths carry with it blame for predicaments. The following descriptions are common rhetorical devices used to keep women from questioning the status quo.

First, some argue because women have entered the workplace there is more poverty. Conservatives have long blamed women and feminism for poverty. If women would just get out of the way and “let men” have their jobs then poverty would be eliminated. Along with this argument is a perception that women actually take wages from men. A connection with women entering the workplace and a drop in men’s wages provides a necessary scapegoat to an exploitative system. Again, it is much more attractive to connect agency with the actions of women, thus providing a good location for blame.

Second, as women are participating more and more in the public workplace it is a convenient time to blame them for the plight of children today. Women are blamed for tearing families apart for working. Divorce is more common today. It must be because more women are working. Numerous articles are published each week asking whether or not mothers working scars children for life. Again, putting the responsibility solely on women to raise children and sustain family life creates an undue burden on women and leaves them responsible for all of society’s ills. Blaming women is much easier than looking to a capitalist society in general and all that entails.

Third, for poor women or women on welfare the responsibility for one’s plight is even more extreme. Women on welfare in one sense accept the societal notion that they should be home caring for their children. In many cases welfare is a more sound economic and psychological “choice.” This safety net is quickly being removed. Women are now only going to be allowed to stay on welfare for two years in a lifetime. While women on welfare seem to accept society’s notion of care and children they are portrayed in a contrary way. Women on welfare are portrayed as “savages” or “living off the system.” The idea of choice is a continuing theme. The perception is that some are “getting fat” off the system. Images of leeches and dependency are prevalent in the media. The social systems in place also stress work for benefits and blame these women for their plight as well.

The term “mommy track” downplays the reality that women with children are more likely to have low paying dead-end jobs. *Wal-Mart* does have a flexible schedule; some are open 24 hours a day, but day cares are not attached, nor livable wages, or substantial benefits.

Many women in the United States working inside and outside the home must provide for themselves and their families on less than two-thirds the wages earned by men. Of all the poor people over eighteen living in the United States, 63 percent are women, and women who head households bear the brunt of poverty.

This disproportionate impoverishment does not affect all women, nor does it affect them all to the same degree. Again, using wages as a gauge of these differences, white women earn 70 percent of white men's earnings, while black women earn only 64 percent of what white men earn. (Hennessey and Ingraham, 1997, p.2)

Randy Albeda and Chris Tilly (1997) in an article titled *Glass Ceilings and Bottomless Pits-Women's Work, Women's Poverty*, which appears in *Soujourner*, discuss the huge hurdles poor women face. They paint a historical landscape of the challenges women and families have faced over the years. According to Albeda and Tilly in 1947 women were only 47% as likely as men to be working or looking for work as men. By 1996 79% of women were working or looking for work. Across races, African American women were 54% as likely as African American men in 1954 to be working or looking for work and 88% as likely in 1996. The variations do cross races.

As women are only earning two-thirds of what men make or 67 cents on a dollar the wages for men have been falling significantly as well over the last two decades. This is much to be concerned about. Women have made great strides to gain access to employment and the rise in the sharing of housework and childcare in the home. Today, more and more single women can support themselves without the aid of a father or a spouse.

The real concern they point out is an unlivable wage across gender. In the current system it is nearly impossible to raise a child without the aid of a spouse. The concern is not based on a moral imperative, but a material one that puts more and more women in danger of living in poverty.

Albeda and Tilly (1997) explain the hardship that part-time workers face. Part time work pays about 40% less per hour than full time work. The average part time job offers less than one-third the weekly wages of a full time job. This material "gap" does not provide for more "flexibility" if workers do not make enough to feed their families never mind caring for them.

Albeda and Tilly (1997) also argue that many full-time jobs assume a wife at home doing large amounts of unpaid work. Our economy, in fact, depends on this unpaid labor. "When professional women who do not have 'wives' cannot work more than 40 hours a week, they often find themselves shunted aside to the so-called 'mommy track.'" (p.16) When a "full-time" worker does not have the safety net of support this seems an almost impossible feat. Apter (1993) also voices a similar concern in *Working Women Don't Have Wives*. She looks at multiple ways that women face challenges at work and at home.

Marketers are beginning to look at single mothers as a potential market. *Marketing to Women* (1999) in *Mothers Go Back To Work Quickly* provide the following insight: 6 in 10 or 59% of women age 15-44 return to work within one year of having a child- US Census. In 1980, less than 4 in 10 or 38% returned that quickly. One in five never married women age 15-44 is a mother. One in five single mothers have three or more children. Four in ten single mothers or 42% have never been married.

According to Research Alert (2000) *Most Women Think They're Paid the Same as Men, But They're Not*, 70% of women believe, they personally are paid as much as their male counterparts. 78% of men agree. The American Management Association (AMA) state the average salary of female managers is 62.6% of what a man in a similar position would earn. Women are also less likely to receive additional compensation such as stock options, bonuses, or profit sharing. Men receive 85% of income from wages 15% in other forms. Women receive 91% of their income from wages and 9% from other forms. (p.3)

In *Women Faculty Equal...As Adjuncts* in *Women in Higher Education* (2000) highlights the growing use of part time faculty. While women make up only 36% of all full-time faculty in 1997 they make up 47% of part time faculty. In 1970 only 22% of faculty were part-timers in 1997 it doubled to 42.5%. (p.4) These statistics illustrate that women are more qualified in one sense to teach in higher education, but provided less opportunity in another.

Rhetorical Implications of terms such as the "Mommy Track"

First, we may react defensively and deny the material reality that working mothers and poor mothers face. In doing so we may reinforce the "superwoman" complex. Initial responses to the mommy track seemed to be reinforcing that women could in fact "have it all."

Second, we embrace our own oppression. We may believe the “mommy track” is the best alternative. We may think that we are actually receiving special treatment- i.e. for having children- absenteeism = for men and women. We may degrade those who choose not to participate in the system. We may celebrate capitalism over family out of necessity- i.e. to avoid poverty.

Third, we downplay the oppression of others. We are unable to recognize oppression, as it exists in the workplace or in society at large. We recreate and reinforce oppression of ourselves and others- media and reality.

Second Shift

Arlie Russell Hochschild initially wrote *The Second Shift* in 1989 around the time that the term “mommy track” was coined. She highlights the growing challenges American families face. She stresses that in the fight for more opportunity in the workplace the “home” has been neglected. Women are still expected in most cases to care for the home as well as work full time. In her study she did find a good amount of families are changing and marital satisfaction is higher in families that share household responsibilities, but the attitudes for many have still not changed.

Employers do have the assumption that someone is home caring for the home, even when this is more a fantasy than a reality. Most families cannot make it on one income alone. At the same time women have increased their presence in the public workplace, men’s wages have been falling steadily. Many fields that are attractive for women, such as advertising and public relations have recently seen their wages fall. Some call this the “feminization” of a career. It is a material concern for all workers. Conservatives would have us believe it is women’s fault for entering the workplace. Historically fields such as teaching and nursing have been female dominated fields, when women became the majority in these fields the wages fell. For some there is an assumption that women do not need as much money because they have a husband or do not have families.

These very assumptions became what Hochschild calls the “second shift” and what people in the media and business call the “mommy track.” Both of these solutions to the challenges of women in the workplace are unacceptable. One expects a superwoman amount of labor, the other expects less, due to patriarchy. We must “take care” of women rather than promote them when their time is due.

The Third Shift

Another criticism of terms such as the “mommy track” is that it comes from the perspective of privilege and choice. Many women have traditionally worked outside the home. Poor, working class, and women of color have traditionally worked outside the home. The idea of a “second shift” downplays the reality that many poor women work more than one job and still must return home to care for their own families.

The “third shift” highlights the overwork that many poor women face and the challenges that follow them through out their day. The idea that women can “choose” a track or path seems a bit egocentric. Survival is not a choice it is a necessity. (Almeida, 1998)

Women Don’t have Wives

Career Primary careers that do not allow for the “mommy track” assume that one person is home doing a tremendous amount of unpaid labor to support the “career primary” person. In some cases paid help can reduce the strain, but when children enter the picture the outcome changes. Even with quality childcare raising children is difficult. If a family has two partners and both have “career primary” careers the “hurry up” syndrome becomes apparent.

Possible Negative Outcomes

The Superwoman complex is a real outcome as noted in the second and third shifts. Society’s solution to women’s poverty being blame and discrimination is not working to materially change women’s lives for the better. If we see the “mommy track” that just affects privileged America we are

missing the boat. All over America in every social class women are seen as being the primary caretakers of children. There is still the perception that a man will provide as well. Most households can barely make it on two incomes. If women are the primary caretaker and in more and more families the primary breadwinner, how can it help them to make less money and not have as many promotions? In reality that just causes an unbeatable cycle of poverty. Women go to work, yet many cannot afford quality childcare. If women were paid more and promoted at the same rate as men then quality childcare would be more affordable and thus benefit all, except for maybe corporate America in costs upfront. In the long term corporate America would benefit as well from lower turnover, less absenteeism, and a more diverse workplace.

The term, “mommy track,” is a rhetorical strategy to keep women from questioning the status quo, i.e. embracing their own oppression. The idea that women’s constraints at home are more material than men’s can be substantiated: but it is no justification for oppression. Just because some groups are more oppressed than other groups does not give society the right to continue oppression because it has “always been that way.” Racism does not justify racism for example. The idea that women are trying to “have it all” and the “mommy track” is the solution to the problem is just a disguise for the old oppression that has been there for generations. William Henry (1994), *In Defense of Elitism*, states,

The choice between career and family is so painful that women would rather not make it-and feminist activists are offering the illusory promise that they will not have to. The truth is, however, that in our culture most of the jobs truly worth having, those that are stimulating and demanding and full of intellectual peril, cannot be confined to forty hours a week or anything remotely like it. Working mothers of young children can hardly accommodate themselves to the minimum demands, let alone the maximum and erratically scheduled demands of the best jobs. The ancillary mommy track is not a dismissal; it merely describes reality. (113)

Henry seems to sum up the overall viewpoint of mainstream America. Women’s material constraints are too much for them at home, so let’s not expect as much at work. Let’s “take care” of women and children. There lies the justification for lower wages and fewer promotions. These attitudes are still prevalent. A strong perception that women are not as good as men is still apparent from the preceding quote. These attitudes must be addressed head on.

Recommendations

First, we need to revive the fight for equal wages for equal work. According to the AFL-CIO and the Institute for Women’s Policy (1999) research found that if women earned the same as men the poverty rate would be cut in half. (p.4) The rate for single mothers would drop the most from 25% to 12.6%. (p.4) Union membership also makes a significant difference in wages for minority men, \$177 more per week and minority women, \$135 more per week. (p.4)

Second, as a society, we need to provide for full time child-care. Children are a reality. Our system should not look to them last, but first. We need to put our money where it counts. As we have all participated in blaming women and mothers for the plight of children we must understand the material reality that children must be cared for whether the money is there or not. Economics should not have to determine whether a child is safe or not. A given part of employment should include arrangements for childcare whether the worker is male or female.

Third, we should eliminate the “Mommy Track” consider the “Family Track” or “Daddy Track” instead. If the alternative terms sound strange that should be an indicator of how strange the “Mommy Track” is. If the “Family track” or “Daddy Track” seems condescending then we must look to changing tracking systems all together. More and more families are experiencing the “hurry up syndrome.” Looking to alternatives to the overwork of American families is a useful goal. We must question our assumptions. What we say really does matter.

Fourth, we need to fight for a livable wage. Minimum wage is no insurance of living above the poverty line. This is an unacceptable cost to a modern day society. A family should not be able to work full time and still live in poverty.

Fifth, we need to provide a better safety net for all families. Currently welfare reform has eliminated a safety net for millions of family. Maybe the old system was not just, but now if a family falls on hard times it is almost impossible to get assistance and assistance is greatly limited in time, requirements, and outcome. Resources to assist families in jeopardy have become even more shame provoking and offer little if any permanent solution to the question of poverty.

Finally, we can deconstruct the images presented in the media and the workplace and provide alternative visions of women, motherhood, poverty, and images of success. The immense pressures women face in our society due to discrimination should not be reinforced through an idealized image of choice in the workplace. The “mommy track” is not a solution to the overworked family or discrimination in the workplace. In accepting it as an option we are embracing our own oppression.

Conclusion

Working women face numerous challenges in the workplace. Terms such as the “mommy track” have minimized the extreme hardship many women face in the workplace. The term “mommy track” reinforces the American ideal that “we can have it all.” The material reality that these so called “mommy track” jobs even exist has served to mask the tremendous inequities women face in the workplace. This euphemism for low-paying, dead-end jobs with no room for promotion highlights the growing reality that as more and more women are participating in the public work sphere more and more women are being discriminated against. Along with “mommy track” rhetoric an argument for women to return home, that women’s wages are the reason for lower male salaries are being held up. The idea that women are able to “choose” a slower, gentler track that is non-threatening to men is attractive. Too bad the “choices” are not available to all.

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The "feminization of poverty"™ was first noted by Diana Pearce in the late 1970s, and since that time, various scholars have examined trends in men's and women's poverty rates™ and the ratio between them™ in order to explore how economic status may be affected by gender. The underlying causes for women's poverty vary across countries but generally fall into one of three main categories™ demographic composition, economic conditions, and government policy.Â By the latter part of the twentieth century, it became clear that formal legal equality would do little to change the lives of most women, as evidenced by such phenomena as the feminization of poverty, working mothers' second shift, and the "glass ceiling."™