

The problem with too many names

Working It

BY HEATHER HEWETT

THE CONVERSATION

about work and parenthood has changed radically since my first child was born, nearly seven years ago. Then, the controversial (and contested) media story was that working mothers were “opting out” of the work force in order to spend time at home with their kids. Now, analysts and pundits debate the impact of the “man-cession” on men, women, and children across the U.S., and whether family roles have shifted in the new economy. Journalists like *The Atlantic’s* Hanna Rosin have provocatively asked whether we might be witnessing the “end of men”: Might the restructured, postindustrial economy better suit women, who recently edged out men in the labor market? (I’m doubtful, though I have to admit that the article grabbed my attention.) Others have focused on the impact of the recession on mothers—for example, see “Mama Wants a Brand-New Job” in the Winter 2010 issue of *Brain, Child* or the U.S. Congress’s Joint Economic Committee report, “Working Mothers in the Great Recession,” published in May 2010. The numbers in this report highlighted the impact of financial insecurity on families when increasing numbers of households depend upon mothers’ paid work. Consider this startling statistic: In 2009, one out of three working mothers was the only jobholder in her family.

What these numbers can’t convey, of

course, is how exhausted these mothers must be. (It’s no mistake that *Real Simple* Editor Kristin van Ogtrop gave her recent book on mothering and work the title *Just Let Me Lie Down*.) Despite increasing amounts of time in the work force, mothers still pull a disproportionate percentage of the “second shift,” a term that doesn’t begin to convey the vast number of hours it takes to raise children and run a household, even if one chooses to neglect many tasks. (Unfortunately, in my experience this approach can lead to even more work. For example, if you never vacuum your refrigerator coils, you may return from summer vacation to discover that your fridge has overheated, requiring you to spend half a day throwing away rotten food. Week-old, moldy strawberries are enough to send even the most tireless worker back to bed.)

Neil Gilbert, professor of social welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *A Mother’s Work: How Feminism, the Market, and Policy Shape Family Life*, might be quick to point out that the psychological and economic benefits of my job (like him, I’m a college professor) far outweigh the cost of replacing the food in my fridge, not to mention the trauma of throwing away those hairy berries. (Of course, when one calculates the amount of money we hand over to babysitters to care for our two young children, “out-

THE BOOKS

A Mother’s Work: How Feminism, the Market, and Policy Shape Family Life, by Neil Gilbert (Yale University Press, 2008)

The War on Moms: On Life in a Family-Unfriendly Nation, by Sharon Lerner (Wiley, 2010)

me. True, work-life policies primarily benefit working parents, but to suggest, if somewhat obliquely, that they are a force strong enough to entice some mothers to stop having babies, end their marriages, abandon their young children, and go back to work? Really?

If Gilbert's circumlocutions and insinuations left me scratching my head, his disregard of feminism caused me more than a little irritation. Take, for example, his proposals for supporting stay-at-home caregivers, which are compelling, but not terribly revolutionary. They've been suggested by quite a few feminists (among others, economist Nancy Folbre and writer Ann Crittenden) and implemented by some countries (for example, Finland). You won't find a discussion of their ideas in his book, however. Nor will you find mention of the many feminists who have argued, well before Gilbert got there, that participation in the labor force does not necessarily represent the be-all and end-all for every woman. Granted, plenty of feminists have made passionate pro-work arguments, most recently Linda Hirshman, author of *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* (2006). But many others have offered more nuanced views. Numerous writers and thinkers have observed that paid work may not have been quite the "apotheosis" (Gilbert's word) for those women who have always had to work—historically, African American women and working-class women of all colors—as it may have been for white, middle-class women suffering from *The Problem That Had No Name*. And the history of feminist activism is filled with examples of individuals and groups who have advocated for programs to support the caregiving of poor mothers.

More recently, a growing body of work known as "feminist care ethics" undertaken by scholars and researchers such as Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick stresses how interdependency

and caregiving—not market work and competition—lie at the core of human existence. Furthermore, if you look at women's movements globally, you'll find countless examples of women who maintain family at the center of their lives, even as they organize for myriad goals, such as equal rights, political representation, education for women and children, freedom from gender-based violence, access to maternal and reproductive healthcare, plus basic necessities such as food, water, and shelter. Here in this country, organizations such as MomsRising have been advocating for a range of family-friendly policies to provide women (and men) with more choices, including the ability to move in and out of the work force.

In other words, the feminist movement has always been concerned with more than paid work. But you wouldn't know this from Gilbert's book, which ignores the many varied women's voices on this subject and instead advances the author's somewhat idiosyncratic analysis of how we should understand women's diversity. He proposes the existence of a "continuum of work-family lifestyles"—traditional, neotraditional, modern, and postmodern—to explain women's differing values and choices. These categories reflect a range of women's preferences (as described by the author) and are pegged to the 2002 U.S. Census Bureau statistics of fertility rates among women at the end of their childbearing years. Traditional women are defined as those women who have three or more children (twenty-nine percent of women) and who derive their identity from childrearing and household management. Postmodern women (eighteen percent) are childless (or child-free, as many would prefer to be called) and hold ambitions outside of marriage and family life. The other two categories fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

I finally gave up trying to figure out this system after attempting, and failing, to categorize any of my female friends. It's unfortunate that Gilbert constructs this typology in a vacuum and without reference to some of the most interesting sociological research on mothers, such as Pamela Stone's nuanced study of the diverse experiences of middle and upper-middle-class stay-at-home mothers in her 2007 book, *Opting Out: Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*. Oddly, Gilbert's categories do not factor in family finances, cultural background, or religious beliefs, not to mention infertility—all of which can deeply affect women's choices. He also fails to recognize how feminism has diversified across race and class over the past fifty years. Instead, he turns to conservative critics of "gender feminism" such as Christina Hoff Sommers to support his assertion that "prevailing feminist expectations" have created unreasonable expectations about "modern life, self-fulfillment, and the joys of work outside the home." Doggone those feminists, who along with the national government, have "oversold" motherhood on paid work, providing a "one-sided view" of employment that has unduly influenced mothers' choices. If only mothers had a more "balanced perspective," he writes, they might make different—i.e., better—choices. (Single mothers, Gilbert concedes, have little choice in these matters.)

It is here that I restrained my impulse to throw the book across the room. Sadly, I've become used to folks who blame feminists for every problem under the sun, and I've learned to pick my battles. (On the other hand, claiming that U.S. governmental policies are closely aligned with feminist goals and principles was a new one on me. But I'm not convinced that what ails women most is a lack of perspective and I draw the line at blaming *mothers*.)

going to write a book about women's choices, why not talk to a few of us? We actually might have something to say about the "art of good housekeeping" and "the deep-seated emotional pleasures and transcendental rapture of child-rearing." We might actually know what we need.

If authors like Gilbert portray a world in which many women have been pushed into the work force against their better judgment, journalist Sharon Lerner writes about a world in which the majority of working mothers work because they have to, despite the lack of family-friendly policies and the presence of what Lerner calls the "sinister plot" they encounter on a daily basis. While the overblown rhetoric of *The War on Moms: On Life in a Family-Unfriendly Nation* initially turned me off, Lerner quickly makes her case. After spending time with families across the country, she comes to the conclusion that "life in its overwhelming, multitasking reality has become increasingly hellish for women." "No one is aiming actual projectiles at mothers," she concedes. But businesses and governments have willfully refused to make any structural changes that might help working parents, instead elevating profits and political ideology over human need. In Lerner's book, that constitutes what she calls "a very real assault."

Lerner, a former reporter for *The Village Voice*, collects stories from around the U.S.: families who are plunged into poverty because of a sick child; mothers who must regularly choose between food and medication because they "opted out" of the work force to care for a high-needs child; single mothers who are fired because they get pregnant. Citing data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Lerner observes that the "birth of a baby is one of the leading causes of poverty spells

in the United States." Many other figures provide disturbing evidence of the severity of the situation. Seventy-one percent of the poorest working adults cannot take time off to care for a sick child. In 2006, only two percent of blue-collar workers had access to employer-sponsored childcare; the number rises to a whopping seven percent for white-collar workers. Four out of ten single mothers who pay for childcare spend half or more of their incomes on it. The number of children going hungry rose by fifty percent in 2007 and continues to climb. Low-wage workers now make up almost half of the work force and account for more than half of working parents. In other words, paid employment doesn't necessarily ensure food in the pantry or a roof over your head.

And yet we persist in blaming mothers for their own problems, calling for more personal accountability and responsibility. Lerner acknowledges that part of her goal lies in exposing the deep structural inequities that stack the deck against many working families and that reveal the absurdity of blaming women for their predicament. She exposes other myths as well: that male partners are the problem and that all women share the struggles of professional women. This latter myth suggests that the challenges faced by working families have a simple fix: High-end employers simply need to change their workplace policies. Lerner disagrees. Rather than extrapolating from "elite women's work-life situations," she argues, we should adopt a "trickle-up perspective" and attempt to better understand the obstacles faced by the poorest mothers. The reason? "The issues once associated with poor mothers are increasingly relevant to the vast majority of American women," she

writes, in part because the economy has tanked. All women are increasingly vulnerable—a worrying turn that the Great Recession has demonstrated, in spades.

This perspective takes Lerner to Mississippi, which has the second highest rate of child poverty (first prize goes to Washington, D.C.) and the worst infant mortality rates in the nation. In 2006 twenty-five percent of all Mississippian women lived in poverty (the nationwide rate is less than fifteen percent). Lerner follows the lives of several single black mothers all struggling to work while they raise their kids and search for a way out of poverty. College remains a steadfast, if elusive, goal for them. Lerner describes them as hard working, self-reliant, and resourceful yet notes that the prospects of these women finding an "escape hatch from poverty seem fairly slim. All too often, Lerner observes, "a poverty spell brought on by an untimely birth becomes a life in poverty."

Lerner identifies another reason why so many Mississippian women live in poverty: They don't have access to reproductive healthcare. With only one abortion clinic in the state, highly restrictive abortion laws, and a lack of access to birth control (because of poverty and a pro-life group campaign against birth control pills and "morning after" pills), many women can't take charge of their own fertility. Drawing on her own research as well as that of political scientist Jean Reith Schroedel, who has studied the laws protecting fetuses in all fifty states, Lerner concludes that the cause of women's poverty isn't a lack of personal responsibility or deficient family values. She writes, "My travel in Mississippi cemented my conviction that the lack of control over the decision to have children and the dearth of

