



Motherhood Discrimination

By Joan Blades and Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The Nation*

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In the deep quiet of a still-dark morning, Renee reaches her arm out from under her thick flowered comforter and across the bed to hit the snooze button on her alarm clock. For a few blessed (and pre-planned) minutes she avoids the wakeful classic rock blaring into her bedroom from her alarm. Renee hits the snooze button exactly three times before finally casting off her covers. She does this each morning, and each morning she sleepily thinks the same thing: "It's too early. I was just at work two seconds ago, and I don't want to go back already."

Everything about Renee's morning is structured for speed and efficiency. At 5:45, with her young son, Wade, and husband, Alan, still sleeping, Renee drags herself out of bed and sleepwalks to the shower. She brushes her teeth while the shower is warming, making sweeping circles on the mirror with her hand so she can see her reflection. Renee's movements, though she's thoroughly tired, are crisp, hurried and automatic--she's repeated the routine daily for several years.

Renee knows exactly how long each of her morning tasks will take, to the minute. That, for instance, between 6 and 6:12 she needs to put on her makeup, get herself dressed, get her son's clothes out and ready for the day, and get downstairs to the kitchen to start breakfast.

All this is done with an eye on the clock and a subtle, yet constant, worry about time. Her mind loops over the potential delays that could be ahead: "Is there going to be traffic? Am I going to get stuck behind a school bus? Is my son going to act normal when I drop him off or is he going to be stuck to my leg? Am I going to get a parking space in the office garage or am I going to have to run five blocks through the city to get to work on time?" And if there isn't any garage parking, which happens often, then in order to be on time for work Renee has to run up six flights of stairs in heels because she doesn't have extra time to waste waiting for an elevator. She's done this climb more than once.

Why the stress? At her work, if Renee is late more than six times, she's in danger of losing her job. Like many American mothers, Renee needs her income to help provide for her family. In our modern economy, where more often than not two wage earners are needed to support a family, American women now make up 46 percent of the entire paid labor force. In fact, a study released last June found that in order to maintain income levels, parents have to work more hours--two-parent families are spending 16 percent more time at work, or 500 more hours a year, than in 1979. Despite all the media chatter about the so-called Opt-Out Revolution--and all the hand-wringing about whether working moms are good for kids--women, and mothers, are in the workplace to stay. Yet public policy and workplace structures have yet to catch up.

Why not step back and reflect about how we as a country can really help mothers like Renee? For example, the option of flextime would make a world of difference for Renee and her family. "Flextime would make a huge difference in my life because with my job function, there are busy days and late days. As long as I'm there forty hours a week and get my job done, then I don't know why anyone would care. I don't understand why there's such an 8 am to 5 pm 'law' in my workplace."

Seemingly mundane challenges like getting out the door in time for work and the morning commute, Renee tells us, become overwhelming when coupled with the financial anxieties that face so many families in America. Renee and Alan would like to have a second child, but they worry that they simply can't afford one right now. "By no means do we live, or want to live, extravagantly: We just want two cars, two kids and a vacation here and there," says Renee.

She and millions of other parents across the country are seriously struggling to meet the demands of work and parenthood. Vast numbers of women are chronically tired and drained. But the American credo teaches us to be fierce individualists, with the result that most parents toil in isolation and can't envision, or don't expect, help. It's time to recognize that our common problems can be addressed only by working together to bring about broad and meaningful change in our families, communities, workplaces and nation. It's often said that motherhood is perhaps the most important, and most difficult, job on the planet. This cliché hits fairly close to the mark. While we raise our children out of an innate sense of love and nurturing, we also know that raising happy, healthy children who become productive adults is critical to our future well-being as a nation.

But right now, motherhood in America is at a critical juncture. As women's roles continue to evolve, more women than ever are in the workforce and most children are raised in homes without a stay-at-home parent. At the same time, public and private policies that affect parenting and the workplace remain largely unchanged. We have a twenty-first-century economy stuck with an outdated, industrial-era family support structure. The result is that parents, mothers in particular, are struggling to balance the needs of their children with the demands of the workplace.

America's mothers are working, and working hard. Almost three-quarters have jobs outside their homes. Then, too, America's mothers are working hard but for less money than men (and less money than women who are not mothers). In fact, the wage gap between mothers and nonmothers is greater than that between nonmothers and men—and it's actually getting bigger. One study found that nonmothers with an average age of 30 made 90 cents to a man's dollar, while moms made only 73 cents to the dollar, and single moms made 56 to 66 cents to a man's dollar.

"It is well-established that women with children earn less than other women in the United States," writes Jane Waldfogel of Columbia University in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*. "Even after controlling for differences in characteristics such as education and work experience, researchers typically find a family penalty of 10-15 percent for women with children as compared to women without children."

What's more, it's still common for women and men to hold the same job and receive different pay. In fact, women lost a cent between 2002 and 2003, according to the

US Census, and now make 76 cents to a man's dollar. Most of these wage hits are coming from mothers, because the lower wages they receive drag down the overall average pay for all women.

The United States has a serious mommy wage gap. Why? Because, as Waldfogel writes, "The United States does at least as well as other countries in terms of equal pay and equal opportunity legislation, but...the United States lags in the area of family policies such as maternity leave and childcare." Studies show that this mommy wage gap is directly correlated with our lack of family-friendly national policies like paid family leave and subsidized childcare. In countries with these family policies in place, moms don't take such big wage hits.

Consider one family-friendly policy: paid family leave. The United States is the only industrialized country that doesn't have paid leave other than Australia (which does give a full year of guaranteed unpaid leave to all women, compared with the scant twelve weeks of unpaid leave given to those who work for companies in the United States with more than fifty employees). A full 163 countries give women paid leave with the birth of a child. Fathers as well often get paid leave in other countries-- forty-five give fathers the right to paid parental leave.

By way of example, our close neighbor to the north, Canada, gives the mother fifteen weeks of partial paid parental leave for physical recovery, and then gives another thirty-five weeks of partial paid leave that has to be taken before the child turns 1. These thirty-five weeks of parental leave can be taken by the mother or the father, or can be shared between the two. Sweden, with about a year of paid family leave and some time specifically reserved for fathers, is often held up as a model. Not surprisingly, with this support, Ann Crittenden writes in "The Price of Motherhood," "Swedish women on average have higher incomes, vis-à-vis men, than women anywhere else in the world."

America, on the other hand, generally leaves it up to parents to patch together some type of leave on their own. Some states are starting to give more support to new parents, but only one of our fifty states, California, offers paid family leave. The federal government simply doesn't offer a paid family leave program at all. A weighty consequence emerges from this lack of family support. Research reveals that a full 25 percent of "poverty spells," or times when a family's income slips below what is needed for basic living expenses, begin with the birth of a baby.

Speak to mothers across the nation and you will hear that the vast majority of them find they hit an economic "maternal wall" after having children. By most accounts, this wall is why a large number of professional women leave the workforce, and it's a core reason so many mothers and their children live in poverty. Amy Caiazza, from the Institute for Women's Policy Research, notes, "If there wasn't a wage gap, the poverty rates for single moms would be cut in half, and the poverty rates for dual earner families would be cut by about 25 percent."

But mothers across America are not just crying out for better (or at least fair and equal) pay; they are also yearning to live a life in which they aren't cracking under pressure, a life in which they know that their children will be well cared for, a life in which it's possible to be at home with their son or daughter even just one afternoon a

week without worrying about sacrificing a disproportionate amount of their income and benefits--or losing their job altogether. Some would argue that mothers just need to find the proper balance between parenting and career. We believe there's more to it than that.

While Renee's story captures the essence of what millions of working American women face each morning, Kiki's daunting experience simply trying to find a job shows just how deeply rooted, and widely accepted, discrimination against mothers has become.

A single mother of two, Kiki moved to a one-stoplight Pennsylvania town in 1994. She was truly on her own. Her husband had left several years earlier, when her children were 2 and 4. Kiki hadn't known how she'd make it as a single parent until her mother, a petite powerhouse and survivor of a World War II Russian gulag, stepped in to help. But when Kiki's mother died, there was nothing to keep Kiki in the Long Island town where she'd been living. The rapid property-tax increases in Kiki's carefully landscaped neighborhood of gorgeous Colonial houses were quickly exceeding her economic reach as a single working mother. So Kiki left in search of a smaller town with a lower cost of living.

With this move, Kiki and the kids were alone in a new town that had just two supermarkets. Several diners served a variety of aromatically enticing pork, sauerkraut and dumpling dishes. It was just the change she wanted. Kiki was able to buy a Dutch Colonial house at the top of a small mountain in the Poconos with nearly two acres of land for a fraction of the price of her old house. It seemed ideal, until she started looking for a job to support her family.

On a hot, humid August day, at an interview for a legal secretary position in a one-story brick building, Kiki sat down in a hard wooden chair to face a middle-aged attorney ensconced behind a mahogany desk. His framed diplomas lined the walls, and legal books filled the shelves behind him. Kiki remembers the attorney clearly, even his height of 5'10" and the color of his light brown hair. The interaction was significant enough to remain seared in her mind a decade later. "The first question the attorney asked me when I came in for the interview was, Are you married? The second was, Do you have children?"

It was the eleventh job interview in which she'd been asked the very same questions. After answering eleven times that she wasn't married, and that she was the mother of two, Kiki began to understand why her job search was taking so long.

She decided to address the issue head-on this time. "I asked him how those questions were relevant to the job, and he said my hourly wage would be determined by my marital and motherhood status." What's that? "He said, If you don't have a husband and have children, then I pay less per hour because I have to pay benefits for the entire family." The attorney noted that a married woman's husband usually had health insurance to cover the kids, and since Kiki didn't have a husband, he "didn't want to get stuck with the bill for my children's health coverage."

The attorney insisted that this blatant discrimination was perfectly legal--and he was right. Pennsylvania, like scores of states, does not have employment laws that

protect mothers.

Recent Cornell University research by Shelley Correll confirms what many American women are finding: Mothers are 44 percent less likely to be hired than nonmothers who have the same résumé, experience and qualifications; and mothers are offered significantly lower starting pay. Study participants offered nonmothers an average of \$11,000 more than equally qualified mothers for the same high-salaried job. Correll's groundbreaking research adds to the long line of studies that explore the roots of this maternal wage gap.

"We expected to find that moms were going to be discriminated against, but I was surprised by the magnitude of the gap," explains Correll. "I expected small numbers, but we found huge numbers. Another thing was that fathers were actually advantaged, and we didn't expect fathers to be offered more money or to be rated higher." But that's what happened. The "maternal wall" is a reality we must address if we value both fair treatment in the workplace and the contributions working mothers make to our economy.

Stories like those of Renee and Kiki confirm that something just isn't right about what we're doing--or not doing--to address the needs of mothers across our nation. Some companies and states are experimenting with family-friendly programs, but such programs are not the norm. We need to open a whole new conversation about motherhood by illuminating the universal needs of America's mothers and spelling out concrete solutions that will provide families--whether working- or middle-class--with real relief.

National policies and programs with proven success in other countries--like paid family leave, flexible work options, subsidized childcare and preschool, as well as healthcare coverage for all kids--are largely lacking in America. The problems mothers face are deeply interconnected and often overlap: Without paid family leave parents often have to put their infants in extremely expensive or substandard childcare facilities; families with a sick child, inadequate healthcare coverage and no flexible work options often end up in bankruptcy.

Fixing even one of these problems often has numerous positive repercussions. Companies that embrace family-friendly workplace policies are thriving, with lower employee turnover, enhanced productivity and job commitment from employees, and consequently with lower recruiting and retraining costs. Flexible work options also allow parents to create work schedules that are well suited to raising happy, healthy children.

The good news is that more enlightened policies would provide practical benefits to the whole society. But we need a genuine motherhood revolution to achieve this sort of change. We believe the following Motherhood Manifesto points are a good place to start:

- **M** = Maternity/Paternity Leave: Paid family leave for all parents after a new child comes into the family.
- **O** = Open, Flexible Work: Give parents the ability to structure their work

hours and careers in a way that allows them to meet both business and family needs. This includes flexible work hours and locations, part-time work options and the ability to move in and out of the labor force without penalties to raise young children.

- **T = TV We Choose & Other After-School Programs:** Offer safe, educational opportunities for children after school doors close, including a clear and independent universal television rating system for parents along with technology that allows them to choose what is showing in their own homes; quality educational programming for kids; expanded after-school programs.
- **H = Healthcare for All Kids:** Provide quality, universal healthcare to all children.
- **E = Excellent Childcare:** Quality, affordable childcare should be available to all parents. Childcare providers should be paid at least a living wage and healthcare benefits.
- **R = Realistic and Fair Wages:** Two full-time working parents should be able to earn enough to care for their family. And working mothers must receive equal pay for equal work.

By tackling these interconnected issues together, we can create a powerful system of support for families, improving the quality of our lives and making sure our children inherit a world in which they will thrive as adults and parents. The Motherhood Manifesto is a call to action, summoning all Americans--mothers, and all who have mothers--to start a revolution to make motherhood compatible with life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This article is adapted from Joan Blades and Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner's book, The Motherhood Manifesto (Nation Books).

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