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Life Balance: Can We Have It All?

Beth Brykman

Women today struggle to make difficult choices involving their children and their careers. Can they achieve that elusive sense of life balance? Beth Brykman taps her personal experience and her professional marketing skills to craft this well-researched issue. Having been a full-time employed, part-time employed, and a stay-at-home mom, Brykman interviewed more than one hundred mothers, some employed, some not, from many walks of life, letting the women speak for themselves about the reality of their lives and satisfaction with the paths they selected. This insightful discussion of contemporary motherhood captures the many challenges facing women, offering the pro's and con's for each lifestyle, enabling mothers to determine the best lifestyle for themselves.

A year or so ago, Sue, director of Human Resources at a New York *Fortune* 100 corporation, discussed with me how she was torn between her career and motherhood. She left her home at 7:30 A.M. each day after dressing herself and her two young children. Dropping them off at the daycare center took ten to fifteen minutes depending on the weather, leaving her forty-five minutes to make it to her office on time. Her days were always full, causing her to run out the door at 5 P.M. so that she could pick up her children before 6 P.M. Then she drove home, prepared and served dinner, bathed the children, read them stories, laid out clothes for the next day, and then collapsed. Sue never watched television, never read a book.

Some days when meetings ran past 5 P.M., she left in the middle to pick up her children from daycare, causing ill will among her colleagues at work. Other days she missed school skits or parties held in the middle of the day because she couldn't leave the office, causing sadness and disappointment in her children. And she could never arrange play dates with the neighborhood children after school during the week because she wasn't at home. Sue felt

Beth Brykman, after holding senior marketing positions at Kraft General Foods and Ralston Purina, wrote The Wall Between Women: The Conflict Between Stay-At-Home and Employed Mother from which this article is taken.

that she was on a treadmill and couldn't figure out how to jump off or even how to slow it down.

Sue was at a decision point. Should she stay home gaining more time, more nurturing, more special moments with her children? If she did, was she wasting her education and training, reducing her future earning power and throwing away what she had achieved? While she wanted to be there when her children came home from nursery and elementary schools, she also wanted to maintain her career that she worked so hard to attain.

Anne Crittendon, author of *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued*, claims, "To most women choice is all about bad options and difficult decisions: your children or your profession; taking on domestic chores or marital strife; a good night's sleep or time with your child; food on the table or your baby's safety; your right arm or your left."¹

How did we as women get to this crossroad where society expects us to be successful full-time paid employees *and* selfless mothers as well? To understand this, we must first look at a brief history of ourselves here in the United States.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Since the early settlers came to the United States, the entire family worked together to produce food, weave textiles, make soap, prepare meals, and dip candles. The family was a unified team in producing goods for consumption. Public and private lives were intertwined. The mother was in charge of keeping the household well supplied and functioning, while the father's responsibilities were finances and the education of the children. Both sexes had demanding jobs.

But in the mid-1800s, with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, roles shifted. Fathers went to work in the factories, while mothers continued to stay home and run the household. Mothers no longer needed to use their minds to produce goods for the home, as these items were now manufactured and easily purchased. A mother still had household responsibilities, however, which became routinized and filled her time, but not necessarily her brain.

During World War II, millions of women were forced to move into factories to produce goods necessary for war. Mom became mother, father, *and* breadwinner. Having experienced being out in the workforce, women realized their potential beyond the home and family.

When the war ended and Dad came home from overseas, Mom was fired from the factories to make room for “the man of the family.” It was at this point that the role of a “full-time” mother as a consumer rather than a producer peaked. During this boom in the 1950s, suburban housing blossomed. Mothers became isolated by housing patterns and days spent chauffeuring other members of the family. These changes made her appear, at times, more like a servant to the family than an integral part of it.²

Most Americans believe that the 1950s lifestyle was the “norm,” with Dad working to support the family, while Mom cared for the children in a spotlessly clean home with fresh-baked cookies. Yet this so-called norm developed because television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* rose in popularity and replayed over the next forty years, equating families with breadwinner dads and stay-at-home moms.

When Betty Freidan, founder of the National Organization for Women, wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, she identified the voice within the suburban housewife: “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.”³ Women married later and had fewer children. More and more women were college graduates moving into careers and had husbands who were no longer embarrassed by a working wife.

As Leora Tanebaum, author of books on women’s issues, states in *Catfight: Women and Competition*, “From that point, the 1950s-era ideal family continued to live on only televised images. Nostalgia for the nuclear family as it was depicted in these programs has anxiety that the traditional nuclear family is the only correct and healthy type of family arrangement: When mothers work, the nostalgic-minded believe, families (and society) suffer.”⁴ In the 1950s and 1960s society pressured mothers to be like June Cleaver, the gold standard in mothering, from *Leave It to Beaver*.

Yet the women’s movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s frowned on women at home. Why were they not using their college degrees? Why were they depending on a man to provide for them? Cokie Roberts, news analyst for National Public Radio and ABC News, claims in her book, *We Are Our Mother’s Daughters*, “The women’s movement gave lip service to the concept of choice but didn’t mean it. The strong message: Women, to have any worth, you must go to work, show that you are just like a man.”⁵ In the 1960s, employed mothers were on the defensive; in the 1970s stay-at-home mothers were on the defensive; by the time the 1980s rolled around, *everyone* was defensive.

In the 1980s and 1990s, expectations for women were elevated. But while women were now out in the workforce in large numbers, they were still

doing 84 percent of the housework.⁶ Mothers now had two jobs instead of one!

According to Shari Thurer, author of *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*,

Thirty years after Friedan, many women are on the edge of a huge generational divide, and they are experiencing vertigo. We are the first cohort of women, who, whether by choice or necessity, work outside the home. We are the first generation of women among many who dare to be ambitious. But there is no getting around the fact that ambition is not a maternal trait. Motherhood and ambition are still largely seen as opposing forces. More strangely expressed, a lack of ambition — or professed lack of ambition, a sacrificial willingness to set personal ambition aside — is still the virtuous proof of good mothering. For many women, perhaps most, motherhood versus personal ambition represents the heart of the feminine dilemma.⁷

So we had feminists breaking taboos by discussing the boredom and isolation of being confined to the home, and we also had mothers at home enjoying their lives who felt insulted and ridiculed. Neither the liberated, employed mother nor the traditional at-home mom was comfortable; each believed that society was damning her. This tension between the baby boomer mothers was labeled the “Mommy Wars” in the late 1980s by Jan Russell: “Working moms think stay-at-home moms are idle and self indulgent, stay-at-home moms think working moms are neglectful and egotistical.”⁸ After this was published, articles on this topic flooded newspapers and magazines. The debate over who is the better mother has raged since then. As Shari Thurer claims:

If we stay home, we fear that we are turning into our own mothers, complete with their low self status, self sacrifices, and frustrations. . . .
But if we are ambitious, or even if we work outside our homes out of necessity, we are afraid of what our distraction will do to our children. . . .
So where does this leave us? Either childless or very mixed up.⁹

What should a mother do? Stay home with low self-esteem and take comfort in the thought that we are the best mothers because we sacrifice for our children, or continue to work and support our families while being tortured by thoughts of what we might be doing to our children by not being continuously at their sides? The choices that were meant to liberate women actually created a life balance issue.

DECISION POINT

Today when women finish their education — through high school, college, or graduate programs — they embark on chosen vocations and careers. Some

become freelance artists, social workers, project engineers, physicians, or factory workers, while others become dietitians, lawyers, secretaries, chemists, sales representatives, or journalists. Some get married and start a family right away, and others wait years before looking for a spouse and having offspring. But no matter when women have children, a large majority initially continue their jobs.

The decision to remain working full time outside the home upon birthing children is simple for most women — they just need the money. Then at some point, four-year-old Ashley comes home from daycare, crying or the relative sitting Johnnie can no longer fulfill his needs as he begins to talk, or the fourth nanny quits on Sally's second birthday, or Mommy is simply burned out and cannot carry on for one more day. For whatever reason, at this point, many mothers pull out of the workforce, stop their professional lives for the time being, and decide to stay home full time. This is where Sue is today, torn between two worlds with one foot in each.

EMPLOYMENT

Should she remain in the workplace? Employment offers income, fulfillment, and self-esteem. While a few mothers work only to cover expenses and gain no pleasure from the experience, most women voice their enjoyment in getting out of the house and contributing to society. A paycheck is empowering; not having to ask your husband for money is empowering. Employed women savor having an identity beyond motherhood, being independent by receiving compensation for their labors, and interacting with adults on a highly intellectual level. Our society respects a paycheck, labor that realizes compensation, and, therefore, the people who earn wages.

“I equate dollars with independence as I got to leave home and get away from my mother by earning my way out,” says Amy, a marketing vice president. “Earning money is power. I need to earn money so that I can go where I want, eat the way I want, and dress the way I want. It's part of my self-definition. I personally need a paycheck because it gives me control of my life, helping me to define myself and my lifestyle.”

“I have chosen to continue to work even though I am juggling because I feel that if I quit, a part of me would be missing,” claims Kelsey, New Orleans teacher of disabled and handicapped children. “Each person in my family has something for themselves, so when we get together, we all get along well. My career actually enhances my family life.”

When a mother is employed, she chooses to have power and control in the outside world — in hospitals, courts, corporations, and universities. Yet

she hands many hours of her child's life over to the control of others, diminishing her time and influence as a primary caregiver.¹⁰ To discuss this daily powerlessness over her children is difficult for an employed mother to do. It is easier to voice her longing for more time — more time for her children, more time for her husband, and more time for herself. And as wrong as it is, mothers who work outside the home are considered women who put themselves ahead of their children. Society tells Mom that employment should be for financial need only, and that the mother at home is *the* gold standard. Such sacrifice of self is supposed to be the cornerstone of motherhood.¹¹ These societal attitudes add to the enormous guilt that employed women already feel regarding motherhood.

In addition to guilt and the lack of time, mothers easily describe the constant compromises being made between the family and the job. Janet, an employee relations manager for a large Detroit firm, speaks for most full-time employed mothers: "If I'm at home, I'm thinking about my e-mails at the office, and when I'm at the office, I'm thinking about Johnny's birthday party. I can't win."

STAY AT HOME?

Should Sue leave the workplace to stay home with her young children? Staying home offers a family situation where mothers can enjoy more time with their children and husbands, run a smooth household, *and* have time for themselves.

"I've made the right choice for me. . . . Women who earn money for a high lifestyle are sending the signal to their children that they are not important, that money is important and being busy is important, not that downtime with Mom and Dad is important," says Melinda, Asheville stay-at-home mother. "Now I would almost go into debt to stay at home with my children and keep my home running smoothly."

Most stay-at-home mothers left the workplace because they did not like the family trade-offs that they were making while being employed and raising children. For some women, the compromises were daycare issues — nineteen-year-old nannies from Idaho wanting to see New York City, using baby-sitting as a ticket to fulfill their dreams, or childcare providers using the television as a pacifier at daycare centers — while for others it was a need to get better connected with their children. Yet for many, the trade-off was purely about chaos in the household and juggling ten balls in the air at once.

No more daycare compromises, no more juggling two jobs, no more living in constant chaos, plenty of time for family and self — sounds great?

Yet the at-home mother's world is not like that of June Cleaver in the late 1950s television show *Leave It to Beaver*. Today's mothers have been out in the workplace, earning their own paychecks and shouldering the responsibilities that come along with making money. Now when she remains home, she misses various aspects of her vocation — an identity, intellectual stimulation, respect for a day's work well done, and a paycheck. In addition, her routines can be isolating and debilitating because of lack of adult interaction and positive feedback.

We live in a society in which the lowest form of work, both in terms of status and finances, is day-to-day childcare. Domestic cleaning work is even more highly paid.¹² So when a woman leaves her career to become a “full-time mother,” she trades in her professional identity for one that holds little social status in most people's eyes, making her feel much less empowered than when she was employed.

PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT

Maybe Sue should opt for part-time employment. Isn't that the best of all worlds? A thirty-hour work week with one day set aside just for the children — three days in the office, one working at home, and Mondays off. Sounds ideal, yes? What about full-time responsibilities with 60 percent of the pay or the same job title for twelve years? How does that sound? You can clearly see the dilemma of the part-timer — family-friendly hours executing intelligent work in a stagnant position, with little chance for promotion.

American women are open to career opportunities out of the norm in order to balance vocations and family, forming this new species called part-timers, dependent on internal motivation and criteria to define their success. Working anywhere from five to thirty-five hours per week performing paid services, from marketing research to nursing, from interior decorating to bookkeeping, the part-timer has no image or stereotype. Most women, even part-timers themselves, can't describe her. She is a new breed of woman, one who strives to maintain a smooth family life yet also earns income for financial reasons as well as for her own self-esteem. Some perform part-time duties to stay current within their industries so that they can return full time when the children are in high school or if they incur unforeseen financial difficulties. Yet one does not hear about this woman who is trying to balance her life. Employment appears black or white — you are either a full-time worker or you are an at-home mother. But today's reality is not that concise, finding many women in that grey area of part-time work.

Connecticut mom Peggy feels extremely blessed with her work situation, family atmosphere, and flexibility, as she is busy as a credit analyst at a

local bank, a position that she enjoys. “Life is a tough balancing act, yet with my working twenty-five hours per week in a professional, flexible atmosphere close to home, I have the best of both worlds. I can have a professional life while the children are in school and still be a ‘mom’ in the middle of the day, if necessary. I consider this the ideal.”

No matter how many hours a women works, five or thirty-five, when asked about part-time employment, a clear majority of part-timers believe that it gives mothers the “best of both worlds” as long as the job involves “utilizing your brain.” A small minority see part-time employment as the absolute worst possible situation, stemming from the fact that you have to “do it all” with even less money than full-time employment.

“When I was a part-timer, I was responsible for 100 percent of my previous full-time job projects in addition to 100 percent of someone else’s who had recently left, working 60 percent of the hours and receiving 60 percent of the pay I had formerly earned,” declares North Carolinian Sally. “I was working two full jobs with 60 percent of the wages. The bank thought they were doing me a huge favor and made me feel that my job was on the line all the time. Because I needed the income, I let the bank take advantage of me for two entire years. I enjoyed the interaction with my customers but hated employment at the bank, working for smug men whose wives were at home.”

According to a survey completed by *Redbook* magazine, 61 percent of full-time employed mothers claim they would like to work either part time or on flex-time hours.¹³ In fact, 50 percent of the part-time working mothers interviewed started their own companies to continue working in their fields part time since that was the only way they could work on a shorter work-week schedule. Shari leads her own part-time company, teaching CPR and first aid, with the knowledge that her efforts will result in saving people’s lives. Cynthia runs her own marketing consulting firm from 8 A.M. to 1 P.M. daily. Beverly is an attorney writing briefs three days per week, and Lola designs layouts for magazines as a freelance art director four days per week. None of these women envisioned themselves as entrepreneurs when they were in their early twenties. The idea of forming their own companies was a strategy to meet the goal of pursuing their careers while also caring for their children.

Most part-timers, stay-at-home mothers, and full-time employed moms, see part-time work as the ultimate situation for a mother. Part-timers earn income, hold a professional identity, and still have enough time to minimize the chaos in the home, participate in their children’s schools, and maybe even have a chance to get together with girlfriends. These mothers have

found that elusive sense of balance in their lives by bridging the gap between the worlds of “mom” and “employment.”

Katie’s comment wraps it up for the majority of part-timers: “Right now, I could increase my compensation substantially as an emergency planner if I shifted to full-time employment. But I won’t because I have a perfect blend of career and family time.”

ALTERING LIFESTYLES

And while Sue is making her decision, she should realize that she may be revising that option down the road. Life choices change over time. Many mothers interviewed re-evaluated their choices and shifted lifestyles again after five to seven years due to the change in their children’s needs and/or family income.

Returning to the workplace on her own terms was Cynthia’s goal after being at home with the children for three years. She started her own part-time marketing consulting company, running her firm from 8 A.M. to 1 P.M., Monday through Friday, in order to maintain contact with her young children. “At first, I was nervous that setting up my consulting company would be seen as a lark and not taken seriously by major corporations, my prospective clients. Yet once I received that first job, others seemed to follow one after another as I needed them. Being patient while starting up my company paid off, as it took six months of effort to land that first consulting engagement. There were times that I was offered more opportunities than I could handle and was forced to turn down clients that I knew would never call again, but I preferred that to running myself into the ground. Being able to call my own hours and stick to them was the basis for forming my own company — it certainly wasn’t for the stability. Emotionally, I kept thinking that my luck would run out any day and that no more clients would call, but that never happened.”

Cynthia wasn’t the only mother who developed her own firm in order to obtain the paid hours that she desired. In June 2005, the *Wall Street Journal* stated that many middle-aged women started their own businesses as a way to formulate their own solutions. In fact, 10.6 million women-owned businesses exist in the United States, accounting for 19.1 million employed people.¹⁴

Cristine’s story exemplifies teamwork with her husband, adjusting her life over time to meet her family’s needs: “When my law firm was in the start-up phase and I wasn’t earning much, I began practicing law part time from home. Both my daughters stayed in the same part-time daycare center so

that I could work peacefully at home. My husband resigned from his job about this time. Up to this point, he had not spent any time with the girls because he had worked long days at his corporation and then restored an old home of ours at night. His resignation related directly to wanting to be part of the girls' lives. Now he would become the childcare provider."

"Of the two of us, I had more earning potential upon expanding my business. Since I was making enough money to open my own office, I did so, increasing my hours. Unlike with my husband's prior career, I could arrange my own hours to take advantage of good weather in the spring, summer, and fall. On beautiful days, I could take a hike or go swimming or play in the park with my family, then return to finish up any remaining work later at night. I was running my own legal practice, earning the income for the family, and still coming home by 4:30 P.M. so I could take Anne and Judy to the park or to a local pool in the late afternoon."

"Then, I was offered a job with a corporation that was regular hours, 9 a.m. to 5:30 P.M. While the freedom of determining my own hours would be lost, it offered full coverage insurance, which I needed as I had been struggling with health insurance," Cristine continues. "On my own, I was using COBRA insurance, which was expensive. The insurance was a huge issue for me because Judy will need hip surgery in the future. In addition, the job provided a regular salary, which was better than the income I had been receiving in a fledging law practice. While my own practice was more interesting legal work and afforded more flexibility with the girls, I had to do what was right for my family and leave my own firm for the insurance and stability in compensation. The current job is less stressful as I have no deadlines, but I miss the afternoon walks in the park with the girls."

WHAT'S BEST?

So what should Sue do? What should all mothers do? While speaking to the many women who contributed to my book, I heard mothers who are confused over what to recommend to their friends and relatives regarding work and motherhood. Danielle says that, based on her own experience as a software expert and mother, "Your college diploma should say, 'Warning: You can't do it all.' Reflecting on everything, I am most perplexed about what advice I should give my daughter. I don't know what to say, I don't know what to wish."

What do you *say*? What do you *wish*? The answer is not full-time employment versus staying home, but balance. Balance is the new definition of success — it is key for a mother's state of happiness. For the full-time worker, success may be having time to read bedtime stories to her four-year-

old daughter each night, while success for an at-home mom may be running a plastic-recycling program in town. The appropriate balance between time spent on self-fulfillment, whether or not that is employment, versus time spent on the family, varies for each individual.

“Time is a scale for everyone, at-home mother, full-time employed mom, or part-timer,” says Tammy, a former accountant and current real estate agent. “You are happy when you are balanced between the various facets of your life — your social, creative, parental, and intellectual sides. If you have reached equilibrium, then you are happy. But if there is a big skew in any one direction, your scale gets tipped off balance, and frustration sets in. I must keep my scale balanced so as not to be irritated and discontent.” Tammy’s observations regarding herself seem to hold true for most of the mothers I interviewed.

Lawyer Bridget finds balance with full-time employment. “When I was employed full time, some women said that I was going to miss the first steps of my children, their first words, but I was looking at my next promotion. The first words that I heard them speak were their first words to me. I went to the office and when I was getting frustrated with my job, then I would go home. When the family began to drain me, then I would go back to work, creating the perfect balance for me. I would have longed for the one that I was missing if I hadn’t done both.”

Susan Lewis found life balance at home. “I grew up thinking that intelligent, ambitious, well-educated women no longer stayed at home with children. I believed myself to be those things, and yet early in my thirties I stepped out of the practice of law and landed, not exactly feet first, in the world of diapers and playgrounds. I hadn’t lost the desire for personal and professional fulfillment, yet children had added a dimension to my life that was much more significant, demanding, and compelling than I’d ever understood or imagined.”¹⁵

For Denise, balance comes in the form of part-time employment. The ten hours per week filling prescriptions as a pharmacist gives her enough adult interaction and energy to fulfill her in a holistic, emotional way. She enjoys time with her son much more now than when she was a stay-at-home mom. By pursuing her own interests and simultaneously taking care of her son, she maintains equilibrium in her life.

No matter what women choose as a lifestyle, the decision is never made lightly. Each mother interviewed had thought long and hard about life with various forms of employment before settling on her own current choice.

So Sue’s choice should be one that provides a short-term solution, not one that is a lifetime commitment. Her life will evolve and her needs will change

over time. There is no one “right way” or definitive path to be a mother with a balanced lifestyle. There are many options for successful motherhood. Sue, as well as all mothers, should evaluate the varied pathways that others have blazed to determine the best road for themselves and their families to reach their life balance equilibrium.

Notes

This article is adapted from the Introduction, Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 8 of Beth Brykman’s book, *The Wall Between Women: The Conflict Between Stay-At-Home and Employed Mothers* (2006, Prometheus Books).

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