

FOR THE FAMILY?

HOW CLASS AND GENDER
SHAPE WOMEN'S WORK



Sarah Damaske

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*To my mother, Frances D. Knapp, and my grandmother, E. Lucille Nichols.
Their work, inside and outside the home, inspired my own.*

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1

THE NEED AND CHOICE MYTHS

VIRGINIA LAUGHED WHEN I asked her to tell me about her work experience. It was a difficult task because Virginia, a white working-class woman, started the first of many jobs at an early age. We met at her apartment on the second floor of a weathered three-story building in a neighborhood left behind by the city's gentrification. We sat at her kitchen table as she kept an eye on her two children, ages seven and ten, who popped in and out of the room hoping to participate in our conversation. She recalled her entrance into the workforce: "I started shampooing [at a local hair salon] when I took up my trade, which was the tenth grade. And then I, you know, worked different stores and I did that until I graduated high school, because that's when I could get my license."

Soon after, Virginia met and married her husband, a white working-class man, and they started a family of their own. A janitor, her husband worked nights and picked up extra shifts when he could. Virginia continued to work full time after the birth of their son, but, she said, a year after their daughter was born, "I started working part time. And then I stayed home to raise the kids." Virginia left the workforce to "be home for the kids," but after a few years returned part time. Asked about her changing work and family experiences, she explained, "A mother should be home with their kids," but added that this isn't possible today, because "financially, [women] have to actually work in order to make it possible for their kids to have

more.” Virginia said her family’s financial needs prompted her reentry into the workforce.

Unlike Virginia, Cynthia, a white middle-class woman, had never taken more time off from work than her paid twelve weeks of maternity leave, and she had only one employer for her entire career. A month after she graduated from high school, Cynthia went to work as a legal secretary for a law firm. “And I’m still with the same company actually. It’s about eighteen years,” she explained. Cynthia went to work for two lawyers, and as they were promoted in the law firm, she was promoted, too. “My bosses became partners so they kind of took me with them.”

Cynthia met her husband, an analyst at the stock exchange, in high school before she started work. “We went to the prom together. And we just stayed together through everything,” she said. He worked a nine-to-five schedule on the stock exchange floor, spending a couple of evenings at work each week, making close to \$250,000 annually. At twenty-seven, she became pregnant, and, she explained, “I kind of wanted to quit, but then since I had my mother and she kind of encouraged me, ‘Oh stay at work,’ . . . so I could make all the extras and everything. Because we could have managed on my husband’s salary, but you know she was just encouraging me to stay at work, so I could do better for them [nodding at her children].” Even though her husband’s salary was in six figures, Cynthia said that she stayed at work to earn “all the extras” for her children. Cynthia’s “extra” salary of \$75,000 was significantly more than the \$60,000 combined annual income of both Virginia and her husband—what was considered extra for Cynthia’s family would have covered the basics plus more for Virginia’s. Yet like Virginia, Cynthia explained that her work helped fulfill her family’s financial needs.

Although they lived very different lives, Virginia’s and Cynthia’s explanations of their work participation followed a common storyline about how financial needs drive women’s decisions about working. In fact, almost all of the women I interviewed, regardless of income or whether or not they worked, explained that they made their work decisions *for the family*. But a closer look reveals a more complicated picture. Virginia first left the workforce after new owners took over the salon where she worked. “I hated working [there] at that time,” she said. She had multiple conflicts with her new boss and he reduced her job flexibility, leaving her less time to spend with her children—“It just wasn’t the hours that I wanted,” she said. At the time, Virginia’s financial situation was troubled. Her husband had lost his job, and several years of unsteady employment followed. Despite the family’s mounting financial concerns, Virginia decided to leave the workforce in the face of growing dissatisfaction at work and reduced flexibility.

When she went back to part-time work, Virginia’s family was doing much better financially—her husband had been employed in a stable job for two years. While the

additional money from her new job added to the family income, her financial situation had actually improved from when she left the workforce—indicating that financial need alone does not explain her complicated workforce decisions. She returned to work after finally managing to find a job she really “loved,” teaching at a cosmetology school. Her new job required shorter hours, giving her more freedom to care for her school-age children. Employment also affected her outlook on herself: “It makes me want to get up and go somewhere. Like, if it wasn’t for work, I don’t think I would even get dressed. I would be in my pajamas all day.” While the language Virginia used to explain her workforce decisions focused on financial need, her actions did not—she left a job that she disliked when her family had no regular source of income but returned to work when she found a job she loved as her family’s financial stability grew.

Cynthia experienced work very differently than Virginia: she had only one employer, received promotions, was paid better, enjoyed a high level of autonomy, was in charge of other workers, and felt recognized and appreciated for her work. As her bosses received promotions, so did she, until she was working for the most senior partners in the law firm. “Since [my bosses] are partners now, they have people, like a lot more people, available to them to help out so I could kind of pass [extra work] along to the associates’ secretaries. You know, I can give them the work and kind of tell them what needs to be done. It’s not all on me anymore,” she explained. Cynthia had risen to a high level in the firm, able to pass along less enjoyable work to more junior secretaries. She also had good relations with her coworkers and employers: “I like the people I work with. The attorneys are really good to me. We’ve been together for a long time so we work well together.” She also greatly enjoyed her work, explaining, “It just seemed very fascinating and I liked that it was fast paced and a lot of things happening. It was just very interesting to me.”

While Virginia’s husband experienced multiple challenges at work, Cynthia’s husband, a white middle-class man, sailed through college and found great success at his first job. “He’s really happy I think. You know, it’s a really good job and he got a lot of promotions since he’s been there, met a lot of people, and he could go into a lot of other areas at [his work]. So, it’s really good,” Cynthia explained. At age twenty-seven, they decided to have children, and both Cynthia and her husband stayed at their jobs. When we met, their combined income was \$325,000, and they, too, had two children, a girl and a boy. Like Virginia, Cynthia’s explanation of her continued workforce participation focused on her financial needs, yet her work and family circumstances suggested a more complicated picture—she greatly enjoyed her work and was financially secure at home.

Why did Virginia and Cynthia (and almost all of the other women in this study) tell such similar stories about the role of financial need in their workforce decisions,

particularly when they had led such different lives? Today, women face competing obligations to work and family and neither leaving work nor remaining at work can completely satisfy these twin demands.¹ While women are pursuing diverse work and family strategies, they continue to face historically negative moral connotations about women's paid work; staying at home continues to suggest altruism, while working suggests selfishness.² In mid-twentieth-century America, the gender division of public and private spheres traditionally held that women were expected to focus on caring for others, while men pursued paid work.³ Although many things have changed since then, these divisions linger today, as social norms that divide the work and family spheres are connected to powerful cultural beliefs that help define "what makes a meaningful and worthwhile life" for both women and men.⁴

Throughout this book, I suggest that Virginia and Cynthia told similar stories about the role of financial needs in their work decisions because traditional gender conventions oblige women to frame their labor market participation in terms of their families' needs and not their own. When asked to explain decisions to stay in or return to the workforce, employed women, like Cynthia, replied that their family "needed" them to work. When asked to explain decisions to leave the workforce, nonemployed women, like Virginia, said that their family "needed" them to be home. Most women said their work-family decisions were made *for the family*, although this shared language allowed them to remake gendered expectations of caregiving to fit diverse work patterns. By using a frame that stressed obligations to their families rather than the fulfillment of their own needs or desires, both employed and nonemployed women connected work to family rather than an individual pursuit.⁵

The women's explanations of financial need connect to a broader popular discussion that generally frames women's workforce participation in two contrasting ways: middle-class women choose whether or not to pursue a career, and working-class and minority women need to work at a paid job.⁶ The popular media and sociologists alike have focused on middle-class women's withdrawal from the workforce and the inability of working-class women and women of color to do so, suggesting that financial resources allow middle-class women to leave the workforce, while financial pressures force working-class women to stay.⁷

If financial needs dictate women's work, we would expect to find higher employment rates among working-class women, who generally have less income and lower education levels than middle-class women, who generally have higher incomes and higher education levels. But just as Virginia's and Cynthia's accounts do not neatly fit these stereotypes, neither do national labor force participation trends. As women's income goes up, so too does their labor market participation.⁸ Whether women work is even more highly correlated to education level than it is to income. Data

from a 2008 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report show that highly educated women are most likely to work—85 percent of women with postgraduate degrees work, compared to 80 percent of college graduates, 68 percent of high school graduates, and only 48 percent of women with less than a high school degree.⁹

National trends in women's workforce participation do not support what we think we know about choice and need. As we see in figure 1.1, stay-at-home mothers are concentrated in lower-income families. And more middle-class women have joined the workforce over the last thirty years, while employment rates of working-class women have declined.¹⁰ Moreover, today, the majority of all women with children under age six are employed.¹¹

The work-family axis has become the defining structure for most women's lives, as they attempt to manage work and family obligations and conflicts. Given the contradictions between the conventional wisdom about need and choice and the national trends of women's increased labor-market participation, we must unravel this puzzle to tease out differences in how women negotiate their work and family opportunities and obligations across classes.

I conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with eighty randomly sampled women to better understand women's workforce trajectories, the nature of their work, and how they negotiate their identities as women, workers, and mothers. Discovering the process by which women move into and out of the workforce allows for

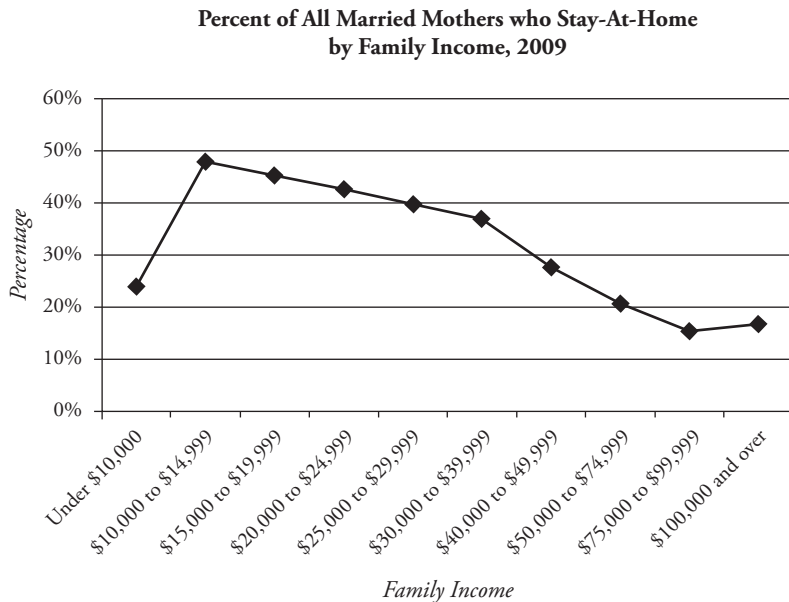


FIGURE 1.1. Percentage of all married mothers who stay at home by family income, 2009. (U.S. Census Bureau. 2009. *America's Families and Living Arrangements*, Table FG8.)

a more in-depth understanding of women's decisions about work, as well as a better explanation of why people continue to believe that financial needs determine women's workforce decisions. I found that the popular framework of need and choice is simply insufficient to explain the complex and varied paths that women pursue as social forces reshape their work-family options across classes. How these women perceived their workforce opportunities and constraints and how they negotiated the world around them provides us with a critical understanding of the way women work, why they work, why they leave work, and how they make sense of the social and cultural expectations of the twenty-first century.

The Need and Choice Myths ---

In October 2009, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page article exclaiming that a “new report” from the U.S. Census showed that “stay-at-home mothers tend to be younger and less educated, with lower family incomes.”¹² *Post* reporter Donna St. George wrote that this finding was “clearly at odds with the popular discussion that has flourished in recent years” focusing on high-profile, professional women leaving their careers to take care of their children. But this is not the first time the Census has published findings showing that working-class women, like Virginia, are more likely to withdraw from the workforce. In fact, Census reports for the past ten years have featured similar findings. Still, though, the news media have remained focused on the so-called growing phenomenon of middle-class women who choose to leave the workforce, while academic studies using national data actually call into question the very existence of this alleged phenomenon.

The idea that economic needs propel women into the workforce even pervades sociological discourse, despite the fact that sociologists and economists have been finding evidence to the contrary for close to fifteen years.¹³ Much economic and sociological research on middle-class women's work has propagated the need myth by suggesting that a family's financial resources are what “allow” women to leave work.¹⁴ While scholars have brought attention to working-class women's workforce participation and their historically high levels of employment, there continues to be a presumption that working-class women's work is, first and foremost, driven by a family's financial needs.¹⁵ At the national 2009 American Sociological Association meeting, many audience members at a work-family session—work-family scholars themselves—discussed how mortgages and children's college tuition ensured that working-class and middle-class women remained in the workforce, and that only upper-middle-class women could leave. Why do the media and much of the academic community have this issue so backward?

At the turn of the twentieth century, women's options for work were poor, and most married women did not work; many companies actually legally prohibited the hiring of women, particularly married women. Those married women who did work for pay generally did so as domestic servants or factory workers and were most often married to men who could not adequately provide financially for their families.¹⁶ From an early point in our country's history, then, paid women's work was tied to the working class. But since the mid-1970s, women living in the United States have experienced dramatic social, political, and economic changes. In 1970, 43.3 percent of women over the age of sixteen worked, and today close to 60 percent do, as do 71 percent of women with children under age eighteen. In contrast, the number of men in the workforce has declined since 1970, when 79.7 percent were employed, compared to 73 percent today.¹⁷ Men still remain more likely to have full-time, year-round work, but women are working more steadily than in years past.¹⁸ Dual-earner families are now the norm among married couples, rather than the exception.¹⁹

These social and economic changes can help us understand how the connection between financial needs and workforce participation was cemented in the public understanding. While little consensus exists as to the causes of these changes, during this same period men's wages stagnated and declined, leaving fewer men able to earn a "breadwinner" wage with which to support a family.²⁰ The congruence of these patterns—lower pay for men and more working women—suggested to some that women were going to work to make up for their husbands' lost wages. Economists often contend that "income effects"—a husband's earning potential, in particular—influence women's work and childbearing decisions, so that, from this viewpoint, a woman's workforce participation is tied to her spouse's salary. Traditionally, economists have argued that women's ties to the labor market are weaker than men's and change as their husbands' ability to provide for the family changes. Some economists have challenged this notion, arguing that women may prefer to stay at home rather than to work for particularly low wages.²¹ Recently, sociologists have added to this debate, arguing that "opportunity costs" are more important than "income effects," meaning that women with higher earning potential have a greater incentive to work and this is more important to whether or not they work than their husband's income.²²

These economic arguments emphasize the importance of money in women's work decisions, but people may be employed or unemployed for many reasons.²³ In her book *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, Pamela Stone shows that when middle-class women do leave the workforce, it is most often not because they choose to leave but because a combination of family and workplace pressures make staying employed impossible.²⁴ Many of these women find themselves in jobs that demand long hours and are married to spouses with similar schedules,

leaving both with little time for the home.²⁵ While Stone and others provide convincing evidence to challenge the idea that women are simply choosing to be at home, considerably less attention has been paid to the need myth—the idea that financial needs (or even financial rewards) push women to work.²⁶

But when we consider Virginia's workforce participation, we see that economic explanations, like the "income effects" argument, cannot easily account for her work decisions. When Virginia first left work, she did not leave because her husband's income had risen; in fact, her husband had lost his job, yet she left the workforce because she did not like to work for her new and disagreeable boss. Articles that focus on the "opportunity costs" of women's continued employment also cannot explain Virginia's return to employment. She did not return when she found a job with better wages; she returned when she found a job she felt she could "love" and that provided better hours.

The seeming neatness of the economic explanation is only partially responsible for the continued misperception that financial needs determine women's workforce participation. Continued cultural ambivalence about women's workforce participation also plays a role. Arguing that financial needs drive their work decisions implies that most women would prefer not to work.²⁷ This is a theme that is repeatedly found in popular media. In 2007, Donna St. George, again in the *Washington Post*, wrote under the headline "Part-Time Looks Just Fine" that most women would work part time if possible but that financial needs keep them from doing so. After 2008 vice presidential hopeful Sarah Palin decided to leave the Alaska governor's office, National Public Radio reporter Michel Martin explained that she envied Palin's decision: "I do not know a single working mother who does not dream at some point, even if just for a minute, about packing up that desk and heading for the homestead, even if that fantasy is about as realistic as the one about supplementing unemployment with Powerball winnings."²⁸ But while both of these examples again emphasize the role of finances in women's work decisions, they shy away from the other reasons that women may leave work or might remain. Think here of Cynthia—while her income was certainly important for her family's quality of life and total overall income, they could have led an affluent life without her salary. She remained at work for many reasons in addition to her salary.

The focus on financial explanations for women's work may reflect Americans' lingering discomfort with women being a part of the workforce in the first place. Although women have gained entry to the paid labor market in unprecedented numbers and men are now participating more in household chores and child rearing, women continue to be primarily responsible for the raising of America's children. Cultural expectations remain that women will dedicate themselves to their children, as Cynthia explained her mother did: "She was there to devote all her time