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No Novelty in Necessity: The Exclusion of Working-Class Women in a “Working Mothers” Narrative

The clichés of working women in the postwar period appear routinely in media portrayals of the time. Women working as part-time secretaries, as personal assistants, as phone operators, and so on, paint what appears to be a “full picture” of how women worked after 1945. But these portrayals exclude the images of women in low-paying factory jobs, women in domestic service, and women in jobs requiring full-time work for less than equal pay. Even as the media touted the successes of women in a variety of fields, the images of working women, particularly “working mothers,” were centered primarily on middle class mothers, and not mothers working full time because they had no choice but to do so. Due to the middle-class biases of media, women of lower or working class were excluded from the media portrayal of “working mothers,” which focused instead on middle-class women and their experiences.

The postwar period in America marked a shift in attitude towards women’s role in the workplace. Conventional histories frame the late 1940s and early 1950s as a time where women were confined to the home, marking a return to “conservatism” following the chaos caused by World War II. Women were encouraged to leave factory positions in order to make room for returning veterans, as “no one [believed] that a woman should be employed at the expense of ex-servicemen”.¹ Women were encouraged instead to take up work more suitable to their nature,

¹ Mary Anderson, “The Postwar Role of American Women,” *The American Economic Review*, volume 34, no. 1 (Mar. 1944): 238.

work such as cleaning the home, preparing dinners, and childcare. However, this conservative push was accompanied by a new understanding that women *could* sustain a position in the workplace, so long as that position was deemed appropriate. “Women, especially married women, entered the labor force in growing numbers”, taking up gendered workplace roles such as secretary, phone operator, or personal assistant.² Married women could occupy these roles to “supplement her families’ purchasing power;” the practice of a woman increasing her spending power by earning her own money grew in popularity throughout the 1950s, as the new consumer culture urged families to indulge in materialism and exuberance where they could.³

With a new emphasis on “the family” as a unit for which men and women both needed to provide, in order to achieve a suitable, middle-class lifestyle, the concept of the “working mother” was highlighted by corporations, advertising agencies, and popular media. Mothers in the workplace became less of an oddity and taboo, and more of a token of success. In the upper echelons of society, to have a stay-at-home wife was still a marker of a family’s success; a husband had done enough work so that his wife did not need to. But in middle class families, a working mother was a novelty, a marketable “fun fact.” Mothers in the middle class could work not out of necessity, but out of desire to “find meaning” in their lives and exist in a sphere outside the home.⁴

This representation of “working mothers” existed in the media as well, in papers such as *The Los Angeles Times* which touted jobs for mothers as a “symbol of prestige”.⁵ To have a job as a middle-class woman was to participate in the zeitgeist that valued the family *and* the

² Ann Porter, “Women and Income Security in the Post-War Period: The Case of Unemployment Insurance, 1945-1962,” *Labour / Le Travail*, volume 31 (Spring 1993): 112.

³ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 38.

⁴ “Women Seek Jobs Offering Meaning: Money and Security Found Secondary in Employment,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 1965.

⁵ Mary Ann Callan, “Part Time Employment for Women Proving New Symbol of Prestige,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1963.

workplace, and the experience was documented as increasing a mother's overall happiness.

Women in the post-war era who began coupling motherhood with part-time work saw a rise in levels of "fulfilment;" their new jobs gave them something to do outside of the home, and helped middle-class women to balance time spent with the family and time spent in private.⁶

However, this representation blatantly excludes mothers who *always* worked, not just in the postwar period. The concept of a "working mother" as it existed in the media encompassed middle class women and their experiences, and not the experiences of those in working class positions. The media assumed that "working mothers" worked short hours in comfortable positions, and touted the successes of women in such positions as a result. However, out of the "20 million women" employed by 1955, this media portrayal excluded the "36 percent" of women working in "major manufacturing firms," the "unskilled" laborers making "\$26 a week or less," and the women employed as "unskilled food product...textiles, apparel, paper and paper products, leather and rubber shoe" manufacturers.⁷ Mothers working in less desirable jobs, with long hours in poor conditions, were excluded from the media's "working mother" narrative, thereby excluded from the concept of "working mothers" as a whole.

Media from the period between 1945 and 1973 assumed that "working mothers" were women working for the novelty of it, not out of necessity to keep their families afloat. Newspaper articles, such as those published by *The New York Times*, stated working mothers were women taking jobs to "help pay for their children's college tuition or their living room furniture," implying that the only expenses a woman needed to participate in paying were luxury

⁶ Melody L. Miller, Phyllis Moen, and Donna Dempster-McClain, "Motherhood, Multiple Roles, and Maternal Well Being: Women of the 1950's," *Gender and Society*, no. 5 (Dec. 1991): 577.

⁷ "Employment Of Women In 1955 Sets New Record," *The Hartford Courant*, January 1, 1956; Frederick W. Carr, "More Women Than Expected Holding Jobs," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November. 14, 1945.

ones.⁸ These articles fail to address the necessity of work for women looking to *support* their families financially, not *supplement* additional income. Women experiencing “urban poverty,” poverty specific to dense cities such as New York, “could rarely afford” to spend their income on anything but the essentials, much less the luxury items that “eased the lives of more affluent women.”⁹ Major newspapers in urban areas where this form of urban poverty was prevalent failed to highlight these struggles, keeping the narratives of working women out of the public eye.

In addition to taking jobs to pay for certain luxuries, “working mothers” were also depicted as only working part-time, in positions such as “half time kindergarten teachers” in overcrowded schools or as assistants in “offices, markets, stores, schools, hospitals, libraries, restaurants, and beauty shops”.¹⁰ These images exclude any mention of women working in full time positions, or in positions in less-than-glamorous circumstances. Women “working ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week” did not make their way into the headlines of newspapers, or into the public perceptions of “working mothers.”¹¹ “Factory work” and “home work”, or work in domestic settings, were not included as possible occupations a “working mother” may have, but they were very much the reality for women experiencing “urban poverty”.¹² Newspaper discussions of working mothers ignore these harsh realities for mothers in the workplace, though, in favor of bolstering a “traditional” and positive image of “working mothers”.

Excluded from the “working mothers” narrative is also the conditions working class women labored in. Mothers working out of necessity often found themselves in low paying jobs,

⁸ Albert L. Kraus, “Working Mothers Play Bigger Role,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 1956.

⁹ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked: A Historical Overview* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981), 47.

¹⁰ “Mothers Pitch In to Solve Kindergarten Overcrowding,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 16, 1955; Callan, “Symbol of Prestige”.

¹¹ Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked*, 46.

¹² Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked*, 76; *Ibid.*, 86.

where unequal job opportunity, sexual harassment, and sexual assault made the workplace particularly dangerous.¹³ This is not to say that middle class women did not face these same challenges, but rather that working class women were *expected* to face such conditions, and middle-class women were not; middle-class women were enticed to take jobs in “clean, well-[lit], and often air-conditioned” spaces, where “lounges equipped with radios, television sets, and telephones [were] provided for use during rest periods and lunch hours.”¹⁴ Working class women were not afforded such luxuries, and instead took “jobs far below the levels to which their...skills [entitled] them” in environments that fostered “sexual harassment,” distribution of low wages, and overall mistreatment.¹⁵ Stories of mistreatment were not breaking headlines, though; it was not until middle-class women began facing discrimination that the media began to report on it. It was a violation of middle-class values to abuse the rights of middle-class women, but it was commonplace to abuse the working class.

Major media outlets had the opportunity to report on the situation of working-class mothers, and chose not to. The question is: why? If “working mothers” were making their way into headlines and into the workforce in staggering numbers, why did only middle-class mothers receive media attention? The answer lies within inherent media biases, and the need to push a particular narrative. Middle-class Americans acted as the main consumers of popularized media, and should that media present a narrative contrary to the middle-class’s own beliefs, that media becomes no longer viable in the eyes of its consumers. The concept of women taking up roles in the workplace was staggering enough; those resistant to the change viewed the act of women

¹³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴ “Women’s World: Ideal working conditions lure telephone operators,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, December 7, 1963.

¹⁵ Kessler-Harris, *Women Have Always Worked*, 161-162.

working as a “symbolic ‘castration’ of men”.¹⁶ In order to make the concept of “working mothers” more palpable, the media ensured that it was a gradual change in language and culture. The headlines were designed to ensure the middle class that women were *starting* to work, not that women had *always* worked. Newspapers pushed that women were to work *part time* so as to remain part of the nuclear family, not *full time* as breadwinners. To appeal to a middle-class base, the media distributed middle class stories, embedded with the biases and expectations that women were still maintaining their traditional roles as wives and mothers, with workplace successes sprinkled in; headlines about working-class women and their push to support their families would not have lined up with this narrative. Working-class women challenged the stereotypes about “working mothers” in ways the media was not willing to support, resulting in the stories of those women being pushed aside in order to make room for stories that felt safe, familiar, and would resonate with readers. Stories of working-class women would not appeal to a middle-class base, and would disrupt the narrative of gradual change the media insisted on creating.

Lower class women existed outside the sphere of “working mothers” as a generalization when portrayed by the media, and though women have always worked, it was middle class women that received the attention for entering the post-war workforce. The media viewed working-class mothers as a disruption to the “working mothers” narrative and barred them from sharing their stories. Women who worked out of necessity, not out of need to fill time or for the novelty of a luxurious career, failed to make headlines and failed to capture the attention of readers who were more interested in reading stories that reflected their own social class and their own perceptions of the female workforce. Despite the millions of “working-mothers” who

¹⁶ Coontz, *The Way*, 32.

entered the work force in the post-war era, or who had *already* been in the workforce prior to a rise in women's employment, the stories of those trapped in the working class did not surface the way middle class women's stories would. The biases of the media, the unwillingness of the middle-class to expand their narratives, and the overall lack of attention given to working-class women prevented the concept of "working mothers" from encompassing a full swath of mothers actually in the workplace.

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