

Maybe We All Need Something More Than a Wife

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During the early days of second-wave feminism, I remember reading Judy Brady's essay "I Want a Wife" about how everyone needed "a wife," that is someone to take care of the tasks of everyday life, as women were raised to do. I was reminded of that forty-year old, tongue-in-cheek, consciousness-raising essay when I saw the front page headline "Wall Street Mothers, Stay-Home Fathers: As Husbands Do Domestic Duty, These Women Are Free to Achieve" by Jodi Kantor and Jessica Silver Greenberg in the December 8 *New York Times*. The authors describe the lives of several high-powered women, who make more than a million dollars a year, and grueling schedules that, like their male counterparts, involve catching early-morning trains into New York City, late night meetings, and frequent travel.

These women in finance choose not to take flex time because they felt that carried a stigma, so they had to make other arrangements. They concluded, with their partners, that a two-career marriage with children was virtually impossible. Their husbands would have to stay home and take care of the kids. Just as with their male colleagues, the joys and tasks of caregiving and running a household are left to their spouses. There are now 22,000 U.S. women working in finance who have stay-at-home spouses functioning as the primary caregivers for their children. While this figure has almost doubled over the last two decades, it represents less than two percent of all married women in the industry.

And the Women in the Auto Plants?

When I worked in an auto parts plant several years ago, those of us active in the union's women's committee organized a survey to find out how those of us raising children or grandchildren balanced our lives with the demands of our workplace. What we learned was that we labored under tremendous stress because we live in a society that maintains that rearing children is an individual choice not a social responsibility. That is true whether we are speaking of one-parent or two-parent households, particularly those that are not surrounded by an extended family able to provide additional resources.

I remember one woman who worked first shift on the assembly line describing how the day care center for her infant didn't open until 6 a.m. Every morning just before 6 she was there waiting at the door and then drove over the speed limit to work and generally punched in at the gate around 6:23 for the plant line's 6:30 start up. I also remember one man talking about his need to leave work on time in order to pick up his child who was confined to a wheel chair, and how he had to make alternate arrangements when he had to work overtime.

Instead of nursing mothers having to pump their breast milk in the crowded locker rooms, our committee tried to persuade management to set up a private room with a rocking chair, breast pump, and refrigerator. They reluctantly agreed to provide an empty space but were very concerned about the possibility of a woman "abusing" her break time. Our committee also tried to get the company to set up a 24-hour quality child care and after-school center—and when they protested that would be too expensive, we countered with having them provide spaces at a nearby childcare center. Unfortunately the union bargaining committee didn't take our demands seriously, seeing them as no more than bargaining chips to start off negotiations, and then quickly taken off the table.

The solution to the issue of holding down a job while also dealing with our caring responsibilities (for one's children, for one's parents, or for others in our family or community) is to simultaneously reduce the workweek and increase social responsibility for caring and educating. The task of raising the next generation and helping the preceding one requires significant resources. Choosing one parent to be the "wife" doesn't come close.

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